

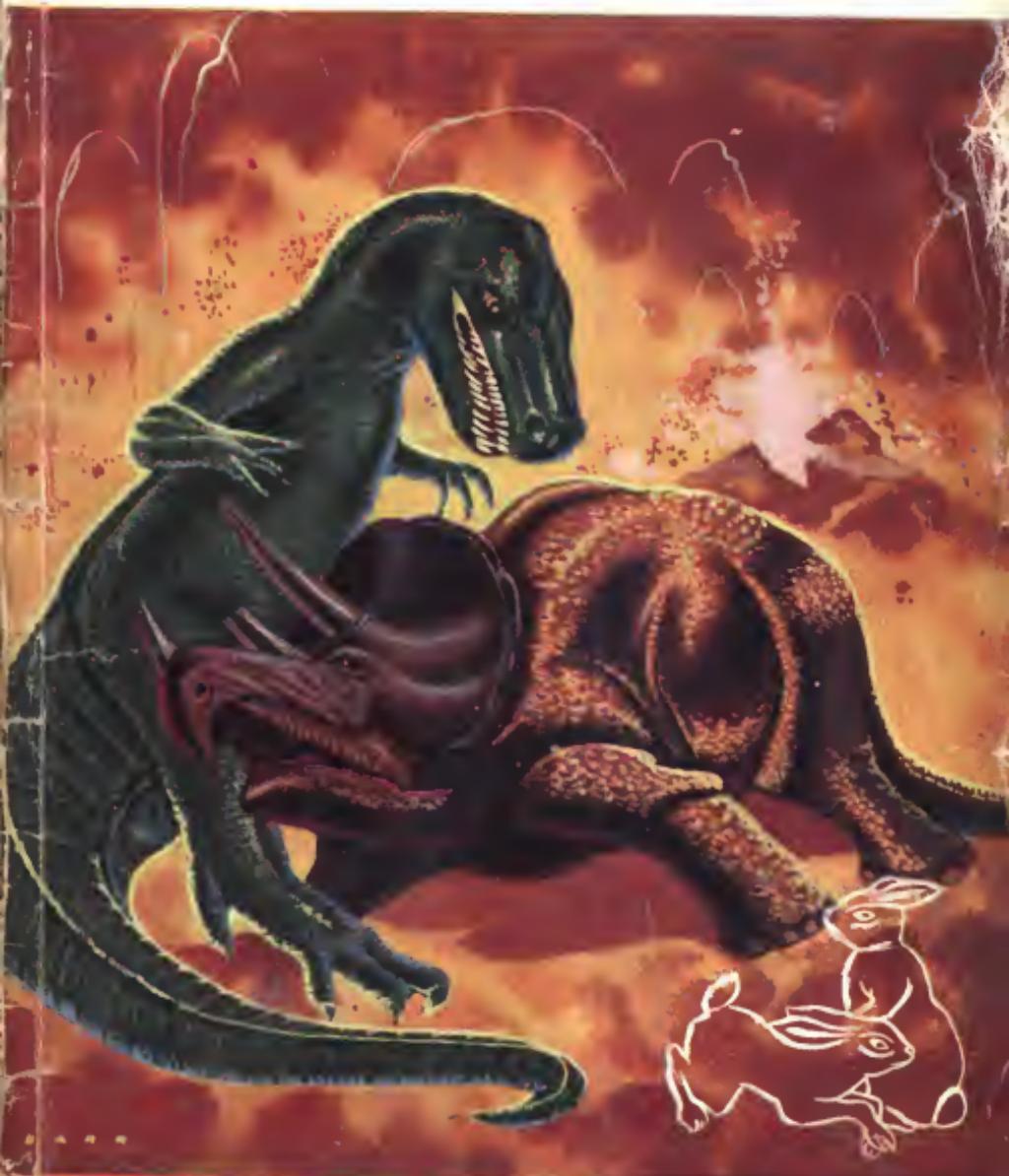
# NEBULA

MONTHLY

## SCIENCE FICTION

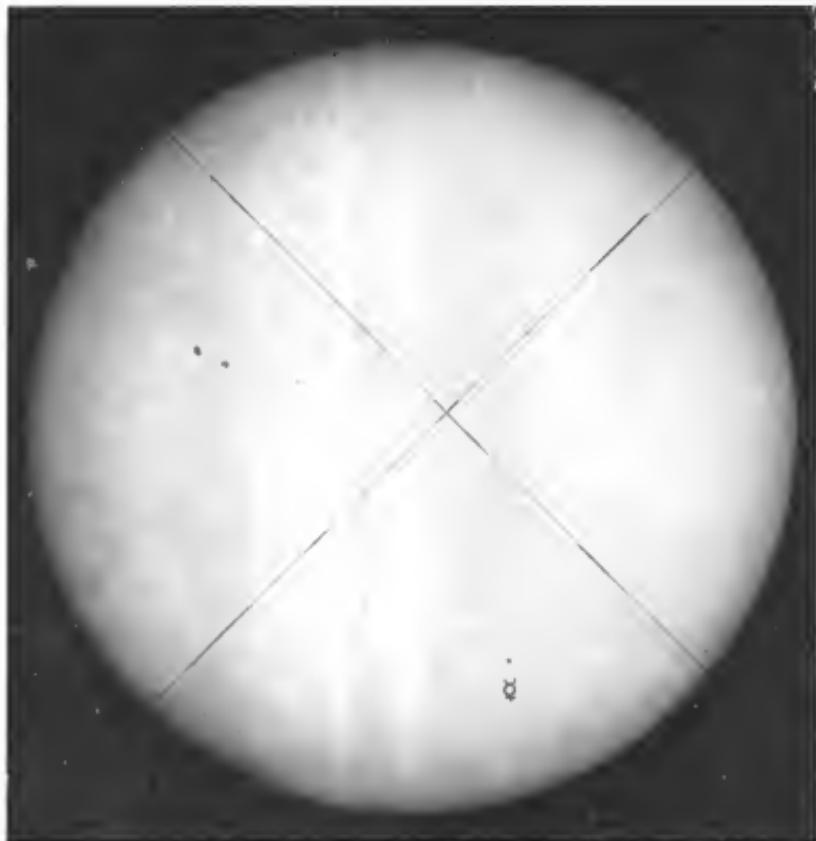
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NUMBER 41



FOR READING THAT'S DIFFERENT

# MINIATURE MERCURY



*Transit of Mercury*

## KENNETH JOHNS

Mercury, a little mouse of a planet, scuttles around the Sun in eighty-eight days. Its mousy brown colour makes it hard to see any surface detail and this, coupled with the overpowering glare of the Sun, has shrouded Mercury in as much mystery as Mars or Venus.

It is the closest major planet to the Sun—and the smallest, with a diameter of a mere 3,000 miles. Since it is well within Earth's orbit its phases can easily be seen and it is best examined with a telescope during the day. Dark dusty markings have been seen on its surface and these are said to vary in intensity; but the markings are so elusive that it was many years before astronomers realised that Mercury's day is equal to its year so that, like the Moon around the Earth, Mercury maintains one face eternally towards the Sun.

No mountains can be distinguished on the surface; but Mercury is probably an extremely rough and rugged planet. When the planet is "full" it suddenly becomes apparently much brighter, the result of the dark patches of shadow no longer being visible to us. Normally the surface reflects little of the light it receives, another indication of a rough surface.

*Continued on inside back cover*

# NEBULA SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

Number Forty-One

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NO REPRINTS

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**Black and White Illustrations by John Greengrass and Gerard Quinn**

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# Look Here

A great many words have been written lately on what it is that constitutes really first-rate science fiction. Is it realism or imagination; characterisation, scientific accuracy or sense of wonder? Or should the author concentrate purely on style and readability?

These questions have been hammered out in the letter columns of every worthwhile science fiction magazine, and have, indeed, received an untoward prominence in many journals much less able to express informed opinion on the subject.

The result of all this controversy has, however, been slight. The average science fiction story is basically the same now as it was 10 years ago (the "old time" fans would have us believe that it has deteriorated!) and the editors of the various magazines are still racking their brains for the magic formula which could bring real commercial success and popularity to the *genre*.

The result of all this mental fatigue in the NEBULA office has, I hope, been of a more positive and practical nature than that engaged upon by many of our confrères. To put it simply, we have decided to publish in each forthcoming issue of our magazine a story, or stories, which seem to us to be representative, of one or other of the various forms which the science fiction of the future is likely to take. I hope that you, the readers of NEBULA, will help me in my search for to-morrow's brand of science fiction, by expressing your candid opinions on these selected representative yarns.

The first of these is "Legends of Smith's Burst" by Brian Aldiss in this current issue. This story is, perhaps, science fantasy, rather than the more orthodox science fiction, but it is refreshingly different in style and is obviously written with the giving of amusement and imaginative stimulation, rather than the imparting of text-book information, in mind. Nevertheless, if you can suspend your natural disbelief as you read it, you may think, as I do, that it is a charming and amusing fantasy, with sufficient colour and originality to merit the inclusion of similar material in forthcoming issues of our magazine.

The questions we must ask ourselves are these: is this story *commercial* enough to appeal to the average non-science fiction reader? Is it too imaginative to be understood by everyone? Has its author made too few concessions to hard scientific fact to effect that very necessary suspension of disbelief I referred to above?

I think we should find the answering of these questions a difficult, but enjoyable, task, and one which should cause plenty of controversy for our future "Guided Missives" columns. The final consensus of opinion will be of immense value and could constitute a turning point, not only for NEBULA, but for the whole of science fiction.

PETER HAMILTON

# For Those Who Wait

*Out in the depths of space were the pioneers of a new age . . . and on Earth their wives awaited their return*

*Illustrations by John J. Greengrass*

The road runs like a ruled line across the face of the desert, wide, clear, seemingly endless yet somehow without meaning. None travel the road, no one goes down it and none return. Yet, strangely, it is alive. The surface is sensitised and blowers work constantly to keep the ever-encroaching sand at bay.

Huge notices, and the more subtle teleprojectors, warn the traveller and the unwary to keep away. Every mile there are check points, automatic weapons and robotic traps. Death lurks, too, under the drifting sands of the desert and the skies are kept clear—by order.

Men builded a road, used it and deserted it, but in their desperation sought to preserve it, not for their sons, or even their sons' sons but perhaps. . . .

This is the beginning of the road, touching the lip of the desert with a beard of tangled wire and robotic death. Yet the road has an end, far over the horizon, beyond seeing, three hundred miles away, the road ends at Survey Base 10.

Survey Base 10 has a blast field covering ninety-seven square miles with repair shops, factories, and administrative blocks. To serve the field is a city, a city housing two million people but a city on its own, a sacred and forbidden city, as remote and mysterious to the outside world as ancient Tibet. Yet, once reached, the city appears normal like any other city. Huge converters provide water; the sprawling buildings of Hydroponics, fruit and vegetables; and BioChem, proteins which really taste like red meat.

Yes, a pleasant city. Exterior conditioners reduce the blazing heat of the desert sun to a tolerable warmth and the wide streets are lined with oak and elm like an English country town. There are parks, sports arenas and even a lake with golden sand and artificial waves for the children.

Behind the lake, and beyond the white towers of Medical Centre, is the gently sloping green of Meadow Hill. The summit was levelled when the base was constructed and here are built the bright and widely spaced bungalows of the "wives". The wives are surrounded with every available luxury and every possible entertainment, their every whim is carefully considered and if possible granted. But there is no real palliative for pain, no ease from the anxiety of waiting. It is something which eats into the soul and strings the nerves to an hysterical ragged tension. Waiting, waiting, with loneliness crouched like a sly and jeering ghost among the guests at the evening party, a ghost which walks with the wives to the parks and the swimming pools like a half-seen shadow.

The wives do not walk much, however, they're chained to the diabolical call-light set behind the square of pink glass in the right-hand wall of every room. They are bound to the convex screen which is linked to the high latticed towers and twirling cages of the Receptor Station, out near the boundaries of the space field.

The call-light—on—off, on—off, with its mellow but curiously jangling chimes. You sit suddenly upright in bed, jerked from a troubled sleep. The chimes, surely you heard the chimes? But the pink glass is blank, you didn't sleep through it, did you? No, they wouldn't let you do that.

The call-light, you sit watching it at night. You chatter gaily, but out of the corner of your eye you're watching, waiting for the pink square to brighten—on—off, on—off.

Surely he'll call tonight. They said his ship would be within calling distance in a matter of days. Were they lying—breaking the news gently so that when the shock comes it will not be too great to bear?

They are all the same these wives, Mamie and Frances, Jean and Tess, Margaret and Sylvia, all slaves to the square of pink glass set high in a wall of each room. And, in the darkness, too often, they turn out the lights and look upwards. Where is he now? Somewhere up there, somewhere high among those strewn glittering lights, somewhere among the multitude of brittle stars.

Mamie, cradling the baby in her arms, says softly: "Where's Daddy?" And the little girl points her soft little finger upwards and says: " 'Tars, Daddy gone 'tars.' " Then Mamie weeps and wishes she hadn't asked.

Outside, however, a stranger would never know she feels like this. She is brittle and poised, her shining ash-blonde hair so scrupulously combed that it seems she wears a shining helmet to match her icy calm. No wife, however, believes her pose for here the play is acted, a play performed by all the wives who ever lived on the hill, a play as essential to their psychology as the coiffure and the beauty parlour. No one knows when it began but all act as if their men's ships had never left the landing field. Be bright, be gay, for in your courage is the courage of all—the show must go on. And go on it does, save, perhaps, for poor frail Mrs. Sakumi with her drawn sad face and tragic slanting eyes. Mrs. Sakumi never leaves the call-light, at night her lights are never lit, she sits unmoving by the window, gazing upwards at the unwinking stars—Jack Sakumi is four months overdue. Soon, you know, they will come for her, the kindly, gently speaking Med-men in the white car with the bright red crosses on the folding doors. They will be kind to her, so very kind, they will take her into the cool shaded room and turn the lights very low. "*There, there, do not be afraid, just close your eyes—you are tired, so very tired—sleep now.*" When she wakes they will have taken away her pain forever. They will take care of her, find her a job and in time, perhaps, she will marry again. She will never know she was once a Survey wife whose husband went to the stars and never came back.

It is not so bad when you're a new wife like Jannine with the dew on your lashes and your heart full of dreams. "Oh, what a sweet bungalow, and isn't it wonderful here, almost like New York."

"You can get out of New York," says Mamie in her most cynical voice. She laughs. "Ah, well, I guess it's the only prison furnished by Masons with interior décor by Ollenki."

Jannine does not care, she is a newly-wed and all is fresh. Every night for twelve nights Receptor will pick up her husband's ship and

the call-light will blink. Every night at nine o'clock for twelve nights —after that, well, she does not think of that—not yet.

Everything is so new, you see, and Jannine has not lived long enough on the base to know, to *feel*, or, more ominously, to see what happens when a ship comes back with something "wrong".

Everything is so rushed, you see, she hadn't realised they would keep her so long at Security—three weeks! The wedding has to be rushed so quickly that it all seems like a dream, a wonderful dream, of course, but nonetheless a dream.

She remembers the ascetic-looking Survey officer with his white smooth hair and stern, but not unkindly, face. There was gold on his collar and a row of tiny silver stars set on a blue and red ribbon high on his chest.

"Do you think you have the emotional endurance to be a Survey wife, Miss Anderson?"

"Yes—er—yes, I think so." She had blushed, feeling like a school girl and made it worse by blurting out: "I'm sure we're psychologically suited."

He had laughed softly. "My dear young lady, if you were not psychologically suited, you would never have met Mr. Keeller even at a public function. Security would have seen to that."

"You mean I was vetted before I was allowed to go to that party where we—"

"Precisely. Survey men are the most incalculably valuable asset in our present society. Only one in eighty million is suitable human material and they cost a hundred million to train. We find it necessary to guard them both from other people and their own mistakes."

She'd said, with a touch of spirit: "Am I a mistake?"

He had taken the question seriously. "From the psychological viewpoint, no. The rest remains to be seen."

"The rest?"

"You must understand, Miss Anderson, that being a Survey wife calls for a depth of spiritual endurance beyond the ordinary." He had leaned back in his chair, studying her with detached but penetrating kindness. "Our investigations have proved beyond doubt that a Survey man is at his best when happily married but that marriage *must* be happy. A man worried by an unfaithful or nagging wife or even recurrent disagreements can make mistakes and a man who makes a mistake in deep space doesn't come back."

"Does that mean we may never have children?"

"On the contrary, children stabilise the home, we encourage it and make every effort to see that all goes well. As soon as we are

advised that a child is expected, the husband is grounded and is not permitted to return to space until after the birth. Even then Medical Centre must confirm that both mother and child are progressing normally."

She had said: "Yes," dully. Feeling that it sounded horribly prosaic and not in the least romantic.

It had gone on a long time. Question and answer, test and check, medical room to inoculation clinic—a whole three weeks!

Now, however, it is over, she is Mrs. Jannine Keeller—or should it be Mrs. Geoffrey Keeller? She is in a bright and beautiful bungalow high on a green hill with every modern convenience the mind can conceive. There is no real work, just press a button and the autoserves wash, polish and clean.

Then there are the parties where the wives play all the silly games they can think of. You tell "Receptor" who you were visiting of course, so that they can beep you if the caller goes. Really there is no need to worry because they explained all that. Once the ship is in calling distance it sends out a recognition signal to which there is a code response. Calling distance is beyond the solar system, so all that takes time. From recognition signal to actual hook-up is a full two hours, so there is no danger of missing a call.

It is on the thirtieth day after her marriage that the realisation comes home to Jannine that there is another side to being a Survey wife—a side she hadn't thought about.

It is at a party at Mamie's, with everyone bright and chattering and one or two a little high from cocktails, when the beeper sounds.

Mamie picks up the receiver. "Hello—yes? Yes, she's here—Jean." She holds up the receiver.

Jean goes white, then red and then sort of transfigured. She is a slender dark girl with a heart-shaped face and the slanting eyes of a fawn. "Yes, yes, right away." She replaces the receiver and laughs gaily, perhaps a little hysterically. "It's a call, he's coming home—bye." She throws something round her shoulders and runs out into the darkness.

When she returns she is still smiling, but it is a smile which has no meaning and her voice is too high pitched. "Yes, yes, it was a call, it was Bob." Her voice breaks just a little.

It is Mamie who puts her arm round the girl's shoulders, the hard cynical Mamie with the cold porcelain beauty and the shining hair. "What is it, Jeannie, girl?" Her voice is gentle.

Jean shivers. "I'm crazy, I guess, just imagining things. The screen was blurry as he was so far away and I couldn't see him

properly, but he kept laughing. Bob only laughs when he's in trouble, normally he just gives that little dry chuckle of his, but tonight he was laughing. He kept saying: 'Don't worry, I'll soon be home', and then he'd make a joke and laugh—— Oh, God."

"There, there, dear, you come and lie down a little while, couple of nervosootheres will do us both good." She tightens her arm about the girl's shoulders and leads her out. At the door, however, she turns and waves her beautifully manicured hand imperiously. "All right, girls, turn up that music. The show goes on; it doesn't do to brood."

The days pass and it becomes quickly apparent that something is really wrong. Stifling rumours in a comparatively small community is well-nigh impossible. A Receptor operator hints to his wife that Survey Ship 902 has had trouble off Procyon and the wives, in their turn, hint in clubs or the city's automatic stores.

The authorities counter these rumours by informing those immediately concerned by a statement of fact, tempered, as they deem fit, by a certain discretion. There are a number of specially selected psychiatrists at the Base, whose unenviable task it is to comfort and make these statements to the distraught wife. At parties, when all is well, the wives call these psychiatrists "the Pall Bearers" but that, too, is part of the play....

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Lever, your husband is having a little trouble, nothing he can't handle, you understand. Just one of those small mechanical failures that do sometimes happen."

"What *kind* of mechanical failure?"

"He thinks one of his grav' refractors has burnt out."

Stiffly, and in a remote voice. "That means a fire-tube landing, doesn't it?"

"Well, actually, it's a question of——"

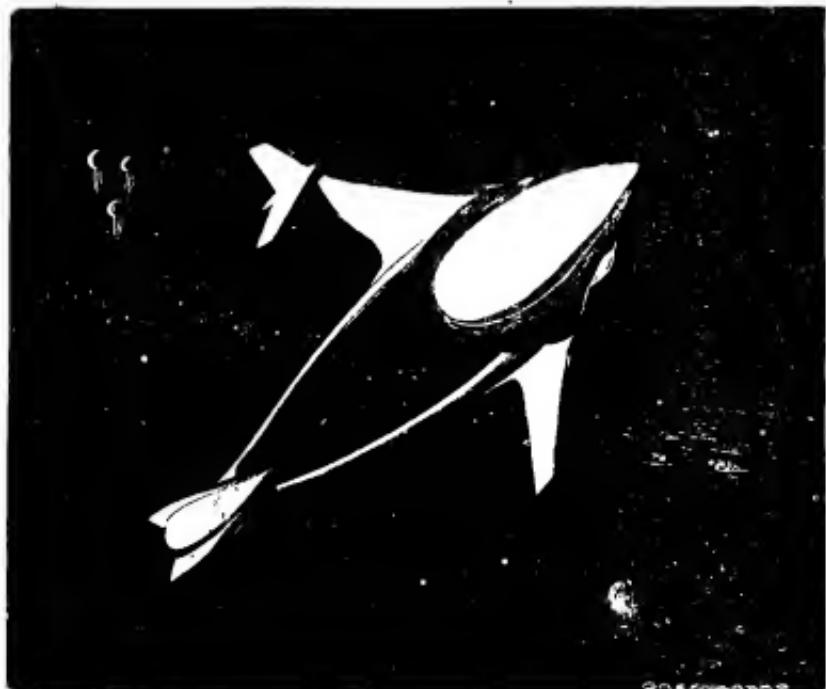
Shrilly and hysterically. "Well, does it, or doesn't it?"

"Easy, now, Mrs. Lever, your husband still has one refractor functioning which means he'll only have to use the tubes as stabilisers."

"Can't you send up a ship and take him off?"

And the psychiatrist, very gently: "Come, now, Mrs. Lever, you know we can't do that. If there's an infection on that ship, an alien disease, picking him up would widen the chances of spreading it."

She nods, dully, not speaking. The ship must come down within the prescribed area of the blast field where all the batteries of science and medicine are prepared and at readiness. If he crashes, of course, they need not worry, the ship will come down as an incan-



descent torch which will burn out before it hits the ground. The blast field has never had a hole in it; if the pilot can't hold the vessel stable on fire-tubes *above* the atmosphere, he'll never be able to correct when he hits it.

Bob Lever faces this hazard, coming back from the stars with one gravity refractor a fused mess. Survey vessels are not built to land on fire tubes, they are built to land on refractors, but this one will have no choice. When it comes, it has to be balanced like a trapeze artist—one hundred and forty-seven thousand tons of metal, balanced tail first on nothing more than a shrieking feather of blue fire.

Twelve days and the tension grows day by day. It takes twelve days to get out of the system, twelve days to get back. It is unsafe to use the Stellar Drive inside a sun system so pilots have to come and go the slow way, on tube-drive.

Something tense seems to grow up everywhere, conversations are brittle, high-pitched, unfinished. The days are too clear and the nights too long because Bob Lever is not only Jean's husband, he is a *Survey man*. It could be Geof or Ray, Domenico or Steve, Karl or Abe. At this moment, at this time, it is almost *your* husband.

Eleven days—ten—nine—eight—  
Seven—six—five—four—three—two—

A road runs below Meadow Hill, a road very much like the one which runs to the base, wide, guarded and closed to all save priority traffic. On the last day the road awakens, growling to the sound of reserve crash waggons and fire tenders. Groaning under the rumbling tracks of the buffer-trucks with their immense saucer-shaped "cushion" projectors. These—these, you pray, may save him. If he can hold for a while, and is not coming down too fast, these projectors will throw up a field which will buffer and slow the descent. Perhaps, God willing, cut his momentum to survivable limits.

Of course, it has to be night and the wives are not sure if this makes the situation worse or better—at night you can *see*.

Night, and the lights go out in the bungalows. Authority has cut power to the view screens, but this does not stop the tense white faces staring upwards. One by one the lights go out in the city also for this is a Survey city and all within it identify themselves with its purpose. The tech services the ship, the auto-café feeds the tech, the truckman distributes the food, all, directly or indirectly, helped put that ship into space and out to the stars. It is *their* ship and Bob Lever is one of *them*. So one by one the lights go out, the dance ends, and the men and the girls in their pretty clothes, wander out into the streets—"Bob Lever is coming home. Bob is going to try it the hard way—on fire-tubes."

Men drift from the bars, drinks still in their hands or left, half-finished, on the polished counters. Slowly the arteries of the city are choked and a million faces peer upwards at the sky.

"There goes the force canopy!"

Over the city a myriad of fireflies dance in the darkness and are gone. Yet, somewhere up there, is an invisible protector, a bubble of shifting power which will withstand the impact of a thousand missiles and, if necessary, a Survey ship out of control.

Above the canopy he has been orbiting for hours and now it's time for break-out.

The city is almost up there with him, sweating it out. Watching the tense set face, the skilled fingers flying over the control buttons, playing on them like a master pianist plays on the keys of a piano. A touch here, a staccato on the tubes there, a brief pause on the remaining refractor and get ready to come down. Turning the vessel over, ready to slide down on its tail towards the earth. . . .

Jannine stares upwards, Mamie tense beside her but Jean is alone. She prefers it that way; she doesn't want anyone there to see her heart die if—if it happens.

"There!" Mamie's hand on Jannine's arm is cold and hard and, it seems, the city tenses with her.

A tiny flare of light, almost lost amongst the stars, a flash so brief she wonders if she really saw it. Then another and another. Flashes of brake fire, cutting the rate of fall, killing momentum. Pause, tiny pencils of fire, then a gout.

Everyone knows that somewhere an assured voice is helping, talking him down, giving height, momentum, angle of descent, so that he may concentrate on the control buttons alone.

"Fire two, power four—nice—nice—steady. Ninety seven thousand feet, rate of descent. . . ."

A red light, slowly descending, spitting tendrils of flame against the velvet of the sky.

"Sixty thousand—all tubes now—fire! Hold it—cut to three—steady, steady. . . ."

The city holds its breath high in its chest, almost afraid to sigh lest it disturb the pilot.

From the blast field comes a sudden humming which climbs slowly to a whine as the cushion saucers build up the buffer field. Above, there is fire again, an inverted fountain of flame reaching downwards perhaps half a mile.

"Fifty-six thousand feet and the buffers have got you, you're going to make it, boy, you're going to make it. . . ."

Alone in the darkened room, Jean sees the shadow of the ship drift slowly downward. Safe now, locked in the buffer beams, fire-tubes still glowing with heat. She walks dazedly to a chair and huddles into it, hands over her face, shivering. Tears run from under her hands and her shoulders shake with sobs. Reaction, happiness, relief, prayer, a mixture of them all.

Mamie says: "Thank God he's safe." And: "One day those damn ships are going to kill me—heart failure. Use a drink?" She does not wait for an answer. "You do. We all do. You're thinking, and I'm thinking, perhaps next time *my* man will come back like that. Seven to eight months a trip and then—" she spreads her beautiful hands—"who knows? It's hell, I tell you." She laughs suddenly and turns on the light. "That's Ray, my husband, that picture over there on the table, he's due back in a few months." She shakes her head amusedly at the picture. "How that guy manages to look so damn dissipated on the monk's existence he has for three

quarters of the year is beyond me, but he has the 'look', hasn't he?"  
"The look?"

"Oh, I can't explain it. It's just a look these Survey guys get. Kind of drawn and half-eager, young and old at once, devil-may-care yet serious, thin in the cheeks and lined round the eyes. Your Geof has the 'look'. It's something this kind of life does to them."

That night it isn't easy to sleep. Jannine twists and turns—was that the caller? No, not yet, months yet, a few weeks before Ray, not yet. What is he doing out there, out among the stars, surveying the strange worlds which no man has even seen before? All the months of waiting, not knowing where he is or what he's doing but only that it's dangerous. Perhaps he'll come back in danger like Bob, or worse still, she'll sit by the caller, waiting—waiting like poor Mrs. Sakumi—*No!*

She need not have worried because this is an easy one, right on the day with a clear sky and a refractor landing. The four days the scientists spend checking him seem like four years and then at last he is holding her in his arms. "A milk-run, honey, nothing to it. One planet was a bit tough but the other was a jackpot—they give us a bonus for jackpots."

"This tough planet, what was it like?"

He makes a gesture of disparagement. "Just one of those places the local life forms don't care for strangers. I saw a dozen of them. If you're really interested you can see the shots in the projection room tomorrow. Anyone can go; no one gets out of the city to talk about them anyway."

She goes, allowing herself to doze through the long orbital surveys until—

The planet looked mean, savage and sultry. Chains of mountains, jagged and uneven, run like the spines of a prehistoric animal across its face. Oily-looking, mist-wrapped seas like between rocky shores. There are ravine and boulder, plains of lank grass, cloudy opaquely glaring skies.

The three-dimensional colour cameras capture the scene so vividly she seems to go down with the ship. Down to a plain of limp brown grass dotted with clusters of twisted trees covered with pulpy purple leaves.

It looks safe enough, so safe that the sense of oppression which at first seized her, slowly vanishes. She goes jolting forward then with the cameras which she knows are built into a survey man's safety suit. Jolting round the tall spire of the ship then out under the glaring skies and across the plain. The jerking movement stops

abruptly, the scene spins and there is the ship again. The jerking movement becomes more pronounced—her husband is running, but running from what? The sky was clear; there was nothing behind the group of ivy-like trees through which he had just passed but a slow-flowing green river.

Realisation seems suddenly to contract her stomach. She sees what her husband saw when he started to run. The river is about a hundred feet wide and *a mile long*. It flows across the open plain as if between banks, but there are no banks. Behind the "river", or where it had flowed, there is no grass, no stunted trees, only a bare furrow of blackened empty earth. The "river" is a mass of jelly eating its way across the face of the plain.

Inwardly she is running herself, her face is contorted, her hands gripping the edge of her seat. The thing is shrinking, drawing in from each end, rising in the middle then rolling forward like a wave.

Blue-white flashes distort the camera briefly, for a second the flared barrel of a solar gun is visible in the corner of the screen, stabbing flame. Fire geysers from the "river", puffs of steam. Cindered holes appear in it briefly, then close again. She realises with a sick helplessness that nothing can stop it, then, mercifully, the cameras cut. She—he—has reached the ship and safety.

She sits for a long time with her hands over her face, unconscious of the beautiful mellow light of the jackpot world now being shown before her. After a time she shivers and shakes her head unbelievingly. Good God, he called *that* a milk-run!

Mamie is getting nervous, you can see it in her eyes and the quick way she talks and Jannine has learned to read the signs. Ray will soon be within calling distance—if, Jannine feels a knot of coldness in her stomach, if he is coming back. This is the ghost which haunts them all once their husbands are gone and how will *she* feel when Geof goes on his next mission?

Mamie calls to see her. She looks drawn and tired, skilful make-up cannot conceal the pouches of weariness beneath her eyes.

Jannine does not dial for a drink; she sends Geof out for it.

Mamie says, abruptly: "Ray called. I came because he sent a message for Geof." She looks at Jannine without seeing her. "Ray and I have been married seven years; you get to know a man in that time, learn to read signs. . ." She turns as Geofrey comes back. "Ray said I was to tell you that company was coming—does it mean something?"

He places the tray of drinks carefully on the table, avoiding her eyes. "It could."

"Look, Geof, you're his best friend and I'm his wife." Mamie has forgotten to be bright and cynical. "I know you have a code and I know you're using it because I can see it in your eyes. Please, for God's sake, tell me, I'd rather know."

He looks at Jannine and she nods slightly. In Mamie's place, she, too, would want to know the truth rather than be haunted continually by a thousand imaginings.

He does not lift his eyes from the tray and the glasses and, when he speaks, his voice is without expression. "It could mean there is something on the ship with him. . . ."

The next day the Pall Bearer calls. Despite his nickname, he is very gentle and kind. "You know who I am and why I have come, Mrs. Dowling?"

Mamie nods; her face is so expressionless it is almost a mask. This, after all, is the reason for the "play". Actresses may weep among themselves but not upon the stage of life and in front of an audience. "I know the score around here. Something is wrong, what is it?"

He clears his throat. "Your husband has something alive in the hold. He can hear it moving about."

"Is that all?"

"Well, candidly, no. It nearly broke through the bulkhead, but he's running power through the metal now and this seems to be—er—keeping it at a distance."

"How did it get there? I don't understand. They only have a few routine samples, some soil, a plant or two, minerals, things like that."

"Well, Mrs. Dowling, we can only assume that the—er—'passenger' developed, as it were, from one of the routine samples. Some of these alien life forms grow by cellular fission. They can remain microscopic or grow at will."

She nods, still outwardly calm. "Guess I'll have to sweat it out, huh?" She accepts a lighted cigarette from the Pall Bearer with a nod of thanks. "What chance does he stand? No hedging now. I've been around here too long and I know the score."

"Very well, Mrs. Dowling, I'll be frank. If he can keep that bulkhead sealed he'll be safe. As soon as he hits the atmosphere he has orders to switch on automatic and bail out. . . ."

When he has gone she puts her hands slowly over her face and

leans against the wall. Ten days shut up with a thing, ten whole days— Oh, God.

The days pass—somehow—four—three—two—

Away over on the opposite side of the city is the huge square tower and sprawling wings of Garrison Building and, overnight, it seems to wake and murmur and spew forth men.

The road running below the bungalows is alive again, but this time to the whistle of energy motors. Men, packed like sardines under the transparent covering of armoured troop carriers, pass endlessly. Dispatch carriers, prone in their shark-shaped groundriders, dart like fish in and out of the moving columns. These are the reserves moving up to take over the defences which surround the blast field. There are growling assault leviathans, as big as ocean-going liners, sleek, low trucks loaded with pursuit missiles, squat heat-projectors mounted like mediæval cannon on the backs of their tortoise-shaped transports.

Something is in the hold of a Survey ship, but what? The base has to be ready in case it is something huge and violent and, in terms of small arms, unstoppable.

On the base airfield the sleek pursuit ships with their devastating armoury of disrupter cannon stand ready and waiting like long lines of silver darts.

And when the time comes, again it is night. This time, however, there is no flicker of fire-tubes, only the steady *toc, toc* of the radar height readers ticking off the refractor-controlled descent.

"Are you alright up there, boy?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." The tense unshaven face comes close to the screen. "Better tell Cranbrook that this is going to be a tough one. That thing in the hold isn't just a lump of something; it's intelligent. I'm running enough power through that bulkhead to cook an elephant and three times it's done something on the other side to blow the fuses."

On the hill and in the city the lights begin to go out again, but this time no crowds spill into the streets. This planetfall is classed as an emergency and the city arteries must remain clear.

The citizens do not wish to go, something is loose on a Survey ship, something dangerous which might get into the city.

In house and apartment, doors are shut, locks tested, emergency shutters made ready to slide across wide windows and the little ones are put to bed in the safest and strongest rooms.

*Toc, toc*—eighty-one thousand feet.

"All right 'up there?'"

And in the homes, now the doors and windows are barred, wall drawers are slid aside, boxes opened, the contents of trunks, unopened for years, quickly thrown to one side. "Yeah, yeah, this can still kick a house apart. My grandfather used it in the Final War and I've kept it serviced."

Out they come, the stab rod, the punch pistol and the exploder-gun, the puff carbine, the electra-pistol, the baseball bat and the axe. Any weapon, any form of defence. "That thing has got to get past this with me using it before it can get near the kids. No point in taking chances, is there? Cranbrook wouldn't run up all that stuff unless he was worried, and if he's worried so am I. Suppose that thing got through the defence ring ?"

*Toc, toc*—sixty-four thousand feet.

"Are you ready up there?"

"Ready."

"Set refractors to automatic and get over to the emergency lock; we've got you well on the cushion—good luck."

Somewhere up there, unheard, the emergency hatch clangs open. Against the belly of the ship there is the brief silhouette of a human being, sprawling, turning over and over. .

Regulation drop routine—emergency. Count as from *now*. One —two—switch on chest control—three—four—five—six—move lever one notch. The shoulder refractor begins to purr softly—thank God. Seven—eight—nine—ten—another notch. The purr increases to a whine. Eleven—twelve—final notch. The pack drags at the shoulder harness painfully with a kind of angry whimpering sound, but the rushing wind is slowly lessening. Time? 0.25 Standard. *Close your eyes*—hell, just in time.

The darkened city is thrown suddenly into intolerable relief as blinding fingers stab suddenly at the sky. Far above the ship glitters like a silver needle trapped in the crossed staves of long searchlights.

Inside the bungalows the city-callers crackle suddenly to life. "Calling Mrs. Dowling, calling Mrs. Dowling—your husband is safe, repeat, your husband is safe."

Mamie throws her arms round Jannine. "Oh, God—*thank God*."

The little girl in the back room, awakened by the noise, begins to sob. She can only understand a little of what the grown-ups say, but she knows it is something to do with her daddy.

Mamie goes to her. "There, there, honey, it's all right—it's all right."

"Daddy gone 'tars," she sobs. "Poor daddy."

Mamie puts her arms round her, blinking back tears. "Daddy home, darling, daddy back home."

Slowly the ship comes down and the whine of the cushion saucers sounds like a far wind on a distant shore. The feeling of tension becomes almost palpable as if the night itself is over-strung like the watchers. Men hunch in control rooms over lighted dials, helmeted men stare upwards from command post and emplacement.

Down—down—and suddenly the whine of the cushion saucers fades and ceases.

Thousands of eyes stare from the city towards the blast field, eyes which are nervous, narrowed, grim or determined. Eyes staring towards the distant light, the glow on the horizon where the ship has landed. The city knows, although it cannot see, that the ship is the centre of an arena of brilliance, an arena brighter than day, ten miles across and ringed with steel.

Mamie is assured now, laughing with relief, wine glass in her hand, jaunty cigarette in the corner of her mouth. "Who'd be a Survey guy's wife? Why don't I quit? It's hell, I tell you."

Geofrey at the window, his arm round Jannine, says suddenly: "My God, listen!"

The night erupts. . . . A sudden chatter of small arms, the shriek of missile launchers and the edge of darkness is torn with a thousand flashes. Pillars of fire climb whitely up the face of the horizon, vanish and reappear like brief and livid fountains. Overhead, low and fast, tubes flickering bluely, a squadron of assault ships shriek towards the blast field.

The door opens. "All right, Mamie?"

"Oh, Jean, come in—you, too, Bob."

"We wondered if you were all right, Mamie. We thought you might be alone."

"That's sweet of you both. Come in and sit down."

Bob crosses to Geof. "The screen is up," he says in a low tone.

Geofrey stiffens. He smiles at Jannine encouragingly with his lips, but lines she has never noticed before make his face gaunt and harsh.

The city-caller crackles again. "Attention, please, attention. This is General Cranbrook, base Commandant, speaking." A pause. "No doubt many of you have noticed that the force screens are in operation. There is no cause for alarm. This is a routine emergency measure and is included in paragraph twelve of regulation Survey Base defence procedure. We are not, repeat, *not* yet facing a first-class emergency. In a few minutes an official bulletin will be issued



from this office together with a first-hand report from specialist departments. In the meantime, stay where you are and treat all rumour with contempt. Rest assured, I shall at all times keep you precisely informed of the situation. Thank you."

"Informative, wasn't he?" says Bob Lever, bitterly. "All palsey walsey and kiss yourself good-bye."

"What's a first-class emergency?" asks Jannine.

There is a strained silence and, finally, Mamie sighs. "Would you like me to tell her, Geof?"

He nods, his face grim. "Thank you, Mamie. It's better that she knows the truth."

She takes Jannine's hand and leads her to the window. "You want it straight, honey, straight and hard?"

Jannine nods, her face colourless but her mouth set.

Mamie pats her arm. "Good girl, you're a Survey wife all right." She points. "Look, right over there, way beyond the battle, encompassing the horizon as far as you can see. Notice a kind of shimmering green? That's the force screen, not an anti-missile canopy like they put over the city but something different. It's about a hundred feet thick and it's hot in the centre, solar heat. Nothing

can pass through it and survive. If the situation gets out of hand, it will become a number one emergency—Cranbrook will press a button in his office and that screen will start to shrink like a bubble growing slowly smaller. Everything inside will go up, puff, like rain on a hot stove."

"Cranbrook would kill us all, just like that?"

"Jannine, honey, you're not following me. When Cranbrook pushes that button, he fries with us. He *has* to do it. He has to destroy the base and all within it to save the outside world. If it's bug eyed monsters, virus, plague, anything he can't handle he *has* to press that button. He can kill the screens once he wins out, but if he can't . . ." She leaves the sentence unfinished, meaningly.

The city-caller crackles again. "Attention, please, attention. This is the official communique from Command Headquarters. The lifeform brought back in the Survey ship is being contained within the second defence perimeter, the armed forces having withdrawn to these emplacements in order to bring their heavier weapons to bear. Further communciques will be issued at hourly intervals, but in the meantime, here is the news from the Alio-biological laboratories."

"Wonderful," says Bob Lever in a bitter voice. "After that remarkable wool-over-the-eyes effort, they could advertise something, couldn't they?"

There is a slight cough from the speaker, then a precise but pleasant voice says: "This is C. S. Morris of Alio-Bi, here to tell you all we have learned about the alien. Perhaps I should speak in the plural and say aliens, for there are many more than one. The creatures reproduce by cellular fission and are energy eaters, that is to say they grow and derive their power to reproduce by eating or soaking up energy. Survey Officer Dowling's conclusion that the creatures were intelligently interfering with the power he was running through the bulkhead was, we believe, an understandable mistake. The creature was tapping that power to grow and reproduce, intelligently, but not for the motive the officer supposed.

"I must add here that I have received the go-ahead from General Cranbrook to state the position from our point of view frankly and clearly. In the first place, the creature's ability to reproduce is well-nigh incredible. Division is completed in seven minutes and the cycle begun again in thirty. Our armed forces are already facing not less than three hundred of the creatures, one-third of which are engaged in reproducing themselves.

"Now here is an important point and, no doubt, answers the question which is in everyone's mind. How did the aliens gain, and

continue to gain, strength in the face of our immediate attack?

"The answer is simple enough. As I have already told you, the creatures are energy eaters and, unfortunately, our primary weapons are energy weapons. Bluntly, our initial attack, instead of deterring or destroying, provided ideal conditions for their growth and reproduction. Unconsciously we were trying to put out the fire by hosing it with highly inflammable fuel." The voice pauses. "Needless to say, all branches in Science Building are busily engaged in improvising negation weapons, some of which are already on their way to the defence line. It is well to bear in mind, however, that, in the unlikely event of a break-through, private weapons, such as solar or electra pistols, *help* the aliens. The best deterrent for private use is the foam spray which may be found, and easily removed, from your home anti-fire unit. I will bring you more news as soon as it becomes available—thank you."

Geofrey sighs. "Sounds as if we're holding by the skin of our teeth."

"Just," says a dry voice, "and the skin is getting mighty thin." A blackened figure in flyer's uniform leans tiredly in the doorway. "Sorry to butt in; crashed on the other side of the hill; saw the door open as I was passing."

"Sure, sure, come in, sit down." Mamie waves to a chair, then, quickly: "You're not hurt, are you?"

White teeth show briefly in the blackened face. "Only my pride—thank you. Some moron put a shot clean through my control wiring, probably mistook me for an alien."

"We don't know what the aliens look like," says Geofrey quietly. "They forgot to tell us that part."

"You don't?" He gulps the drink Mamie has placed beside him and his hand shakes a little as he puts down the glass. "I couldn't have dreamed up what they look like ever. They're like footballs, no, bigger, beach balls, maybe, purple, kind of shining. They've got four green tendrils hanging underneath about three feet long, but they don't seem to walk on them. They seem to drift like balloons with the tendrils about two inches above the ground—God." Sweat begins to cut tiny lines through the grime on his face. "I don't know what they do, maybe it's a sting or something, but if those tendrils touch you—" He swallows nervously. "The guys that got it sort of shrivelled and fell over like they'd been burned dry inside."

The window lights suddenly to a distant explosion and the bungalow shivers and rocks on its foundations. In the discernible

distance a vehicle is burning, orange flames light the sky and there is the flicker of small arms.

"My God, that's near Pike's Point." The pilot springs to his feet. "They're through the line."

"Attention, attention." The city-caller booms suddenly at them. "General Cranbrook speaking—the aliens have broken through the second defence perimeter." The voice is firm and quite calm. "I must hereby proclaim a number one emergency." A carefully-timed pause. "Keep to your homes and do not panic. The force screen contracts one foot, repeat, one foot, every three minutes, which means we have many, many hours in which to defeat the aliens before this weapon threatens our lives and homes. Counter weapons have already been improvised, but not successfully tested and in a short time, six squadrons of hover ships will be attacking the aliens with canisters of negation foam wherever they may be found. I repeat, keep to your homes, negation foam is corrosive and liable to cause severe burning or permanent blindness. . . ."

Jannine stares from the window, watching the battle draw closer. The weapons which the men had made ready at the first alarm lie useless on the table. The two stand by the door, smoking continuously, foam sprays ready beside them.

Mamie sits still, the baby girl, strangely asleep, tight in her arms. Mamie's face has a serene look, a kind of transfigured calm, as if, in the last hour, she has found a peace which, up to now, escaped her. Or is it that death is not so terrible when the family dies together?

When death approaches at last, they are all strangely undramatic. No one speaks, Mamie turns her back slightly to the door shielding the child with her body and Jannine leans tiredly against the wall. The men look at one another, carefully they pinch out their cigarettes, pick up the cylinders of foam spray and stand ready at the door.

Death drifts up the green slope like a ghost. A round ball, purple, shining slightly and somehow evil. The green cord-like tendrils trail above, but do not quite touch, the surface of the grass.

Jannine moves closer to her husband. Fear is still within her, but also a great calm. If die they must, it is bearable together.

Something burst dully on the grass and a pillar of froth rises high in the air beside the alien thing, falls back and flows over it.

Dully, and uncomprehendingly, Jannine hears the high fluting whistle of agony. The foam tosses, writhes and sprays upwards. Twice the thing almost rises above it, but it is becoming blackened now, horribly shrivelled. The green tendrils flail futilely above the

foam like the legs of a fly trapped in syrup. It is finished, helpless, the foam writhes once more, shivers and is still.

The counter attack is on, the night is full of the whisper of hover cars and the dull plop of bursting canisters.

Jannine reaches for the wall and cannot find it. The room sways, spinning round her, turning into a funnel of blackness in which she is falling endlessly.

There is a coldness at her wrists and temples, weight about her head and something pressing on the nape of her neck. Deft hands, white-clothed arms move swiftly before her eyes.

"All right now?"

"Geof—is Geof—?"

"Mr. Keeler is well and safe. You will see him in a little while."

Hands take metal from about her head and wrists. There is a prick in her arm and something infinitely soothing seems to invade her body—she sleeps.

She wakes to a warm hospital room with flowers on the bedside table; through the half-drawn blind the sunlight dances on the window sill. She is surprised to find she is feeling well and quite normal.

A man's voice says: "Are you feeling better now, Miss Anderson?"

Anderson?—Anderson? Who is he speaking to? "My name is—"

"No, my dear, not yet, in a little while, but not yet." It is the Survey Officer with the white smooth hair and the ribbon of tiny silver stars across his chest. He leans forward, his face strangely compelling. "Your mind is full of questions, but if you wish the answers to them all you must lie back quietly and listen. You must not become impatient because, before your questions can be answered, I must sketch in both background and meaning. I must tell you about Survey, do you understand?"

She nods, her face puzzled.

He smiles gently. "Yes, yes, you think you have seen it all, you think you understand. You have seen brave men go to the stars, some have returned, but some you know are among the lost and will never come home. You know also that when these men discover a jackpot world a team of experts is dispatched to live on, and test that world for twenty years. Sometimes that report is favourable, sometimes not, but even if favourable, we are wary. We cannot test as we would wish. A full test would need six generations of settlers, but we haven't the time. We dare not, therefore, commit the safety

of the race to a few planets, but ensure its continuation by sending them to many. Neither of us will live to see it, but the time will come when the race is on its way. Six million to this planet, six million to that until the world is empty. On some of those planets, perhaps, despite our care, the colonists or their descendants may decline and perish, but on others—we dare not put all our eggs in one basket. We must spread them out, sure that some survive and the race is preserved."

She looks at him strangely. "The world empty?"

His face is suddenly sad and she realises he is immensely old despite his alert face. "Yes, my dear, empty." He pauses, staring unseeingly before him. "In five hundred years—the sun is going to go nova. We have no choice but to move on. You see now how valuable the Survey man is. He is making man safe for the future, risking his life to find him a home. Without him the race of man would perish from the universe." He sighs. "They are all volunteers. They come to us, the cream of the race, psychologically and physically perfect, but even that is not enough. We must test them first regardless of their perfection. We must put them in a vice and squeeze to see if we have missed any flaws." He pauses, meeting her eyes directly. "We do this by giving them what we call a mock-up. By three-dimensional cameras, hypnotic suggestion and neural stimulation we induce in the subject's mind what is, to him, an actual mission. He believes, and his stimulated senses confirm, that the mock-up is actually happening. Instruments tell us not only his reactions to the situation but his methods of overcoming it. . ." He stops, still meeting her eyes.

Jannine is pale, her fingers clutch the edge of the sheets tightly. "You called me Miss Anderson. You're trying to tell me that my marriage was a mock-up, a test. Everything that followed was just —just a dream."

He nods slowly. "A mock-up, yes, but not quite a dream. *All* your experiences were drawn from events which *actually occurred* on Survey Bases." He smiles a curious twisted little smile which makes his face look youthful. "If it helps, my dear, my name is—Cranbrook. I am proud to tell you that my people stood and fought until the last alien was conquered." He smiles reminiscently. "The force screen was blistering the paint on some of the houses by then."

Jannine is staring at him no longer angry or hurt. "Do I pass?"

"Pass?"

"Am I good enough to be a Survey wife now?"

He pats her shoulder. "Well said, girl. We'll see you have a

white wedding this time. The testers spoke highly of your courage." Then, very seriously. "You see, my dear, we had to *know*. The life of your man may depend on you. Again, you will be living on a base from which there is no return, in a self-sufficient minor community, virtually cut off from the world. As, one day, similar communities will face a strange planet but with no world to which they may return. Perhaps you are beginning to understand now there are very sound reasons for everything." He smiles. "Perhaps it is some consolation to know that at least we do appreciate the strain placed upon those who remain behind—the wives." He rises, turning his back to her. "Throw a robe round you and come to the window."

"Look." He pulls back the curtain as she joins him. "This is Memorial Garden. We keep it rather sacred and it is only overlooked from this window."

There is a white shining needle rising above the surrounding trees, as graceful and as slender as a Survey ship.

He points to it. "On that memorial are the ten thousand names of those who died on Survey. It is the least we can offer for they died to save the race. Look just below now, at the statue, that is for you. It is for all the wives who saw their men go to the stars. . . ."

The statue depicts a woman with a child in her arms. Their faces are turned to the sky, the child points upward with a baby finger as if asking a question.

On the plinth, carved deep into the stone, are the words: FOR THOSE WHO WAIT.

PHILIP E. HIGH

## BACK NUMBERS .

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# The Silent Partners

*To this strange and alien creature the presence  
of a man was as precious as life itself*

*Illustration by John J. Greengrass*

At first he could see nothing about her except that she was dressed in furs, then that her hair was blonde and, in spite of the night wind, as smooth as glass. When the woman drew nearer he made out the glitter of jewellery at her ears and throat, gold at her wrists and then he could see her face, which was beautiful. He did not know the woman and yet her face was almost familiar, like that of someone he might have dreamt of a long time ago.

Purvey crouched in the utter darkness of the bushes and waited for her to come within reach.

From where he had stationed himself he could see both lamplit entrances to the tiny park. It was strange then that he had not noticed the woman come through the gates, but perhaps he had overdone it with the whiskey while he was waiting. It was years now since he had had to go out and actually rob somebody, and his nerve had needed the drink. The outlook in the confidence business was pretty bleak when a con. man of twenty years' standing had to resort to this.

Taking a deep breath he slid the pistol from his pocket and quickly stepped out onto the path. "Don't make a sound," he warned the woman. "Just hand over your purse and that stuff you're wearing." He stared into her face trying to gauge whether she was the type to do as she was told, or the troublesome type.

In the dim light coming from the street Purvey saw that something had gone terribly wrong with the beautiful face. His hand flew nervously to his mouth and he took a step backwards, raising the pistol protectively.

The woman sagged bonelessly, crumpled, withered away in a second, leaving nothing but a small dark object writhing on the ground at Purvey's feet. With a moan of sheer despair he turned to run. . . .

He was much too late.

Purvey very rarely dreamed, but when he was twelve years old he once dreamed that he had committed suicide by lying in a coffin with earth and roses in it. The thorns pierced his flesh and drew the blood from him, making the roses flourish and bloom until he had been sucked dry and was lying dead beneath a beautiful living shroud of blossoms. Then he had realised he did not want to commit suicide after all.

He had that same feeling now.

Huge fleshy leaves and dozens of dark green tendrils lay across his chest and face, stirring slightly in the wind and dripping wetly. Summoning all his strength he pushed the tangled mass aside, sat up and realised at once that he was in a moving spaceship. He had been back and forward to the Moon enough times to enable him to recognise the sensation, even though his surroundings looked less like the interior of a spaceship than almost anything else he had seen.

The low, almost circular room was brilliantly lit from the ceiling in some places and dark in others, giving an impression of shadowy vastness quite out of keeping with its true size. The walls were dark brown and streaming with moisture. At intervals around the walls were huge fans making random movements on their bearings and creating a cold, irregular wind.

The floor was covered with a thin coating of mud from which jutted a hopeless clutter of instrument pedestals, machine housings, cables and low partitions. There appeared to be nobody in the room but himself.

Purvey scrambled to his feet, almost fell with dizziness, and made his way over to one of the instrument stands which was emitting

a red glow and peculiar high-pitched whistles. On it was a small screen depicting a few brilliant stars against a background of crimson space. The markings on the dials were little blobs of many different colours.

He made a circuit of the room, assuring himself that it was empty, then he began shouting for someone to come and let him out. Nobody came. Purvey was feeling dizzier by the minute as though the very air was some unpleasant intoxicant. He crossed the room, falling once on the slippery mud, and stood staring down at the little view screen, wondering what had gone wrong with his life.

All at once his memory of recent events iced into existence—the woman in the park! How could he have forgotten that hideously dissolving face or the way she had turned into that *thing* on the ground? He ran his fingers over the smooth glass of the view screen feeling slightly better at the realisation that she, it, was not in the immediate vicinity.

Slowly he became aware of a wet, slithering sound from behind.

Purvey spun round, feeling his mouth drag out of shape with fear. The dark green stuff that had been spilling across his face and chest when he woke had come crawling after him, leaving a broad trail behind it in the mud. In the centre of the mass of leaves and tendrils Purvey glimpsed a complicated, knobbly core about two feet in diameter. Some of the tendrils ended in shiny little black beads which looked as though they might be eyes.

Purvey backed away from the thing, feeling in his pockets for the pistol—it was not there. When a wall ended his retreat he stood staring at the moving growth as it laboured towards him propelled by some dimly seen agitation under its core. Three feet away from him it stopped advancing and remained motionless for what seemed to Purvey a long, long time. Then he noticed that, across one huge leaf on top of the mass, faint letters etched out in a lighter green had appeared.

The thing was trying to talk to him.

"You shall have gold," the letters spelled out. The black beaded tendrils waved gently in the air, and the odour of the thing reached up to Purvey—the smell of dusty ivy growing on a rotting wall.

Purvey was immediately less apprehensive. "What for?" He sank down onto his heels and tried to peer into the depths of the growth. "Why will I get gold?"

Another long pause ensued, then the green writing faded and was replaced by, "Explosion wrecked part of ship," then, "including repair shop," then "Lurr has made rough repairs," then "You

are highly mobile," then, "You will stand by during trip," then, "Lurr will pay with gold."

"I don't know how to repair spaceships," Purvey pointed out.

"The work will be simple. You are mobile. I will direct you." The sentences took a long time to come across by means of the thing's, Lurr's, controlled chameleon effect.

Purvey groped around in his pocket and found a flattened packet of cigarettes and a book of matches. When he struck the match it burned with a large brilliant flame and he guessed that the air was loaded with oxygen. Which might also explain why he felt so dizzy, almost drunk. He drew deeply on the cigarette, relishing it.

"Will you take me back to Earth afterwards?"

"Yes."

Purvey considered asking Lurr to promise but decided against it as he had no way of knowing how much the alien's word was worth. It might be no more trustworthy than some of his friends.

"I'd like to know how you got me here," Purvey said. "What was that bit with the woman in the park?" This time there was no answer and he noticed that the little beads had dulled as though Lurr had gone to sleep. Purvey snorted disgustedly. He crouched against the wall, coat collar turned up, and finished his cigarette. The only sound in the room was the restless formless whisper of the fans on the wall above.

Ages later, after an indeterminate amount of sleep, Purvey woke with a new problem.

The vine-like growths that formed the extensions of Lurr's body were draped wetly across him as they had been on his first awakening. He ended the distasteful intimacy by pushing the dark green mass away, uneasily wondering why it happened at all. He was pretty sure that Lurr was sexless, and yet its touch had something of the quality of a ghastly, yearning caress.

"Listen," he said. "How long will the trip last?"

A broad leaf unfurled and the laboured writing appeared. "Fifteen of your days."

"What about food?" Purvey found himself shouting. "I'll need food."

"You shall share the Ahtaur's food."

"Ahtaur? What's that?"

"Ahtaur is a helper. She brought you here."

"I don't want her food," Purvey said, suddenly afraid.

"Ahtaur will not mind." Lurr stirred slowly and moved away, leaving a trail through which could be seen the whitish metal of the



floor beneath. There were tiny perforations in it and, as Purvey watched, more mud welled up through them until the metal was covered.

Purvey followed Lurr, wondering if the last remark had been some kind of crack. Could a thing like Lurr have a sense of humour?

Reaching a little door low down on a bulkhead Lurr extended a tendril, touched a white circle and the door opened revealing the interior of a plain cupboard. At the touch of another circle a hatch opened in the rear surface and a block of pink spongy material slid out. Warily Purvey picked it up and tasted it. It was slightly warm, chewy and tasted like lobster paste with a strong dash of red pepper in it. It was better than he had expected.

When he had finished eating Purvey obtained a rather unsatisfactory drink from one of the little rivulets of water that ran down the walls at intervals. Lurr had gone to one of the instrument panels

and was lying motionless beside it, eye stalks extended and poised over the meters.

By constant questioning Purvey learned that the ship he was on was a kind of scout which had been escorting a huge interstellar liner or battleship. When the accident had occurred, rather than have the mother ship stop for it, Lurr had radioed that it would be possible to reach the base unaided. If the scout failed to reach the destination the mother ship would return for it. Lurr's race had never fought a war, but their battleships were very efficient.

Purvey wondered if the last piece of information had been intended as some kind of a hint. For the possessor of such an alien mind Lurr seemed to have an excellent control of the English language and did not waste many words.

"How is it," Purvey asked, "that you speak, I mean write, English so well?"

But the black beads were dull again. He wandered around the room looking at the alien mechanisms, flapping his arms to keep warm and trying to decide what was wrong about the place. It was *all* wrong, of course, being the product of the thinking of an alien life form. But there was another wrongness.

Purvey found that he got tired easily. Time dragged by in the monotonous discomfort of the room and he slept often, crouched in the darkest corner where there was the least mud. This was the place where the explosion had taken place, as was evident by the seared metalwork, dented machine housings and shattered ceiling lights. Purvey liked it best because it was the one place that Lurr seemed to avoid.

Once when he was feeling particularly miserable and Lurr was in one of the unresponsive moods, he decided to look for something in which to wrap himself for warmth. His showerproof was heavy with mud, wet and absolutely useless and he found himself longing for heat in any form.

Several of the low doors he opened by pressing the white circle, which was a common feature, revealed perfectly normal shelves stacked with unmarked boxes or machine parts which, although beaded with moisture, showed no signs of rust. One shelf was loaded with hundreds of blocks of coloured glass, another with what looked like purple seaweed.

The largest door had a red circle on it. Numb with the cold, Purvey opened the door and saw a little room, in the centre of which was a glowing, old-fashioned pot bellied stove. He was across the

threshold before it occurred to him that the stove just could not be there and jarred to a halt. Just before he jumped back and slammed the door he had a sort of vision of a fat slug-like creature rearing up with grey mouth agape.

Lurr was suddenly conscious again, holding up his talking leaf.  
"I see you recognised the Ahtaur this time."

"*This time?*" Purvey said. "Was that the woman I saw?"

Lurr seemed quite active and alert as the sentences appeared in answer, noticeably quicker than before. The Ahtaur was a very slow moving, carnivorous animal indigenous to Lurr's home planet. It got close to its victims by telepathically invading their minds and controlling the visual centres to make itself appear attractive to them. Apparently Lurr had muzzled the Ahtaur, fitted it with something he described as a force field "grab" and lowered it to Earth to find a human being. Purvey had been the one to fall.

As a by product of their study of the Ahtaur's ability Lurr's people had been able to develop the little device which enabled them to detect and comprehend the thoughts of intelligent animals. Purvey eyed his companion speculatively, rubbing the stubble on his chin. Had he picked up another note of warning?

On the fifth day, reckoned by his wrist watch, Purvey discovered that Lurr had been telling him lies.

His feeling that there was a subtle wrongness in the set up finally culminated in the realisation that there were two entirely separate sets of controls in the room. The set that was in use, at which Lurr spent most of his time, was grouped along one wall. Every part of it, every short pedestal and housing, was constructed with smooth, brilliant metal and beautiful workmanship. The joints in the metal were barely discernible lines and the little coloured dots that Lurr used instead of numbers were perfect circles and squares etched into the metal.

The unused set of controls was scattered over the centre of the floor area and it reminded Purvey slightly of the first radio he had ever built. There were plates that did not fit, unfilled holes, bolts that bolted nothing, and the coloured markings were rough, shapeless blobs of enamel. Scooping away the mud he found that holes had been burned in the floor to let the cables and pipes pass through.

None of these earmarks of a jerried up experimental rig agreed with Lurr's picture of a standard scout ship serving as a ship of the line. But it was hard to see the aliens point in deceiving him over a

thing like that. He carefully refrained from thinking about his discovery in case Lurr *should* be able to read his mind and, acting on principle, began to take an interest in the operation of the ship. He had a feeling he might be on to something.

Another day went by, speeded now by routine. At intervals Lurr drew some of the pink spongy stuff from the locker and pushed it through a slot in the door of the Ahtaur's room. The Ahtaur seemed to have about the same status as a pet dog in Lurr's life, but was never allowed out for a walk. When he was hungry Purvey helped himself and found that he was growing to like the strange food.

"This stuff is okay once you get used to it," he told Lurr, waving his hand, which had become sunburned since the start of the trip. "If you get me the recipe I'll buy a restaurant with my gold when I get back and make it my speciality."

"One of the factors in your enjoyment of the Ahtaur's food," Lurr replied, "is your ignorance of its constituents."

Purvey broke off chewing and threw the remains of his meal into the highly efficient garbage disposal unit that Lurr had allocated to him for his personal use. He stared at Lurr suspiciously, wondering if he was being laughed at—Lurr seemed to be developing a certain dryness of speech which might have been humour.

It occurred to him that the alien was quite different to what it had been when the trip started. In their occasional conversations, for instance, Lurr could print up his little messages faster than Purvey could answer them, and it gave him an uncomfortable feeling that the leafy monster was more intelligent than he. Lurr's movements had become increasingly more rapid until he could get around as fast as Purvey—another thing that Purvey did not quite like. The only change for the better was that Lurr seemed to have got over the strange quirk which drew it to him every time he slept. It let sleep come more easily.

On the seventh day it occurred to Purvey that he must be further from the Earth than anyone had ever been before. Only two ships from Earth, so far, had reached Mars, although there had been much talk of sending a third ship to see why the first two had not come back. And here was Don Purvey half way to a star. . . .

"Just how far have we come now," he asked, "pretty far, eh? How many light years?"

"I am not used to calculating in your units of time," Lurr replied. "The nearest approximation I can give you is six light hours."

"Light *hours*!" Purvey shouted. "But that means we've just crossed the orbit of Pluto. You told me the trip would take fifteen days. Half the time is gone and yet we're still in the Solar System—I don't like it. What's the game?"

Lurr did not answer at once, the first pause for days. Finally, "The journey is in three stages. Getting clear of your planetary system takes up half the time, entering my own system will take up the other half. This is travelling in normal space with standard drive.

"The inter-system jump, using Lurrian drive, takes only a few hours."

Purvey rubbed his beard and grinned down at Lurr. So that's it, he thought triumphantly. The new stuff you added to this ship converted it from an ordinary planet hopper to a star ship. You invented it, didn't you, Lurr? Of course! You just mentioned Lurrian drive. You're all alone—there's no mother ship to look for you.

The speed of the alien's rush took him by surprise and Lurr had almost reached the Ahtaur's door before he realised what was happening. Swearing angrily Purvey leapt after it but one of Lurr's tendrils flicked out and touched the red circle. As the door swung open Purvey tried to stop, skidded in the mud and went down heavily on his side. The shock of the fall drove the breath from his lungs.

Gasping noisily, he saw the Ahtaur writhe into the room with frightening speed, pale grey mouth opening and contracting hungrily. Enveloping it were faint, changing ghosts of formless objects as its camouflaging talent reacted on Purvey's whirling brain. Purvey glanced around in panic, saw nothing he could use for a weapon then scrambled for the row of lockers nearest to him.

He flicked open a door—it was the little glass block again. The next one contained what appeared to be a complicated valve assembly and Purvey snatched it from its brackets. The massive piece of metal almost wrenched itself from his grasp as he swung but he managed to guide it down onto the Ahtaur's back. The soft slug-like body burst open and the valve went down into it. The Ahtaur gave a shrill scream and the flickering images that surrounded it, blurring its outlines, abruptly vanished.

Leaving his improvised club where it was Purvey turned in search of Lurr. The alien was slithering rapidly towards him with a spiky, cactus-like growth extended in front of it. Purvey leapt back realising it was too late to regain his club. He ran across the room

fumbling under his coat until he had loosed off his trouser belt. It was of thin highly flexible metal. Gripping the buckle tightly he turned and lashed out with it and, by sheer luck, connected with Lurr's upraised eye tendrils.

There was a sharp clicking sound as two of the severed eyes hit a partition. Swinging the belt with frightened, loathing haste Purvey struck again and again until all the eyes were gone. After that the job was safe, but it took him half an hour, using a strip of torn metal from the wrecked part of the room, to make sure that Lurr was dead.

The operation of the ship was, as Purvey had learned by watching and questioning Lurr, fully automatic. It was a relatively simple matter for him to cancel the instructions under which the ship's computers were steering it out of the Solar System. On a little stylised model of a planetary system, in which a row of buttons was ranged out in a line from a glowing hemisphere to represent the eleven planets of Lurr's home system, he pressed the third one out to designate Earth.

Lurr had told him that the ship would home in on the third planet of *any* system in this way. The fact that the computers were accustomed to Lurr's home system made no difference because, even there, if the ship was deactivated for any length of time when it was put into use again the planetary arrangement would be completely altered, making it necessary for the ship to scan the heavens afresh and select its destination.

It was a first class spaceship, Purvey congratulated himself, hundreds of years ahead of anything on Earth. For the gadget that made it invisible to radar alone he would be able to get more money than he could ever use. And without having to trust his life to any walking plant either.

When he had fed the two lifeless things into the garbage disposal unit he crouched contentedly in his favourite corner and had his first peaceful sleep in days. On wakening he found he had a slight headache which grew more and more intense as the hours went by. After a meal and another sleep he had to admit, even to himself, that the air in the room had gone stale.

Looking around for air conditioning he found a little grill below each wall fan, which meant that there was machinery to recreate the air as it was used up, and that it had stopped working. Sweating a little in spite of the cold, he searched around and discovered a large duct leading into the wall. The duct emerged from a machine housing near the corner where Purvey slept. Going over

to it he discovered a simple, deadly fact—the sides of the housing had been smashed in by the explosion.

The air conditioning machine was completely wrecked.

Sobbing with sudden fear Purvey ran to get tools, then stopped dead, realising that even if the machinery had been as good as new it would not have done him any good—for when it had been working it *had manufactured carbon dioxide!*

All at once he had the whole picture. Lurr was a mobile vegetable existing by photosynthesis—converting carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates, and giving off oxygen in the process. An explosion had wrecked his carbon dioxide producing plant during experimental flip in the star ship, so he had obtained a replacement—Purvey. Hence Lurr's eagerness to lie close to him at first, hence the oxygen loaded air at the start, the sunray lights and the fact that Lurr had speeded up so much when Purvey had been around for a while breathing out precious carbon dioxide. That had been keeping Lurr alive, and the oxygen that Lurr had given off in the process of being alive had been keeping Purvey alive.

For the operation of a small spaceship Lurr and Purvey had been a perfect team—he realised that it had been a mistake to dissolve the partnership.

As before, he was much too late.

**BOB SHAW**



# On a Day Without a Name

*This remote and misty world had claimed them for  
its own and on it they would live—and die*

**TARE-TARE-TARE-TARE-TARE-TARE.**

He woke feeling mad at the noisy bird, mad and peevish, and for a while he sat hunched up on his elbows, staring at the long candle which burned with a tiny blue flame just inside the mothnet which guarded the entrance to the skin tent. Sitting further up in his sleeping-bag he fumbled on the floor for his pipe and tobacco-horn. He filled his pipe clumsily, and then, with a sleepy sigh, heaved the bulk of his body from the floor and went over to the candle and sucked a light to his pipe.

When his pipe was puffing the way he liked it, he unashed the moth-net from its peg and flung it up on the tent roof and then scuffed outside in his bare feet. The net and the skins of the tent were damp and heavy with stale mist, and although the sun had swung up well above the barrier-hills, the mist shut off visibility so that even the posts of the stockade were out of sight.

Back in the tent he found his sandals, and then sat on the log to put them on. When he had done so and knotted the securing thongs, he stayed motionless on the log, puffing smoke into the warm

air and gazing with unfocussed eyes at the other tent, a sketchy shapelessness in the mist.

That tent was occupied by a second man; there was a third, but he did not live in the stockade any more—not that it mattered the man on the log told himself, not that anything mattered in the slightest.

When the contents of his pipe had burnt down he knocked the ash out against the log beneath him. The sound was muffled in the thick, humid atmosphere; and then from outside the stockade came the derisive cry of the tare-bird once again, and the man got up lethargically and began to rake over the ashes of the previous day's fire. He shook some dried leaves out of a cylindrical box, built sticks on them, and after some careful manipulation with the lighted candle and a pair of homemade bellows, he got a smoky fire burning. For a while he crouched beside it with one hand flopped on his pot belly and the other scratching in his curling beard.

In the thick silence, gazing into the smoke which rose lazily to mingle with the mist, he snuggled into a sort of half doze, his thoughts and consciousness spreading and straying like the smoke and mist, until awareness of his own identity almost left him. Smoke, mist and awareness merged into a milky river which flowed into oblivion over a melting and swaying cliff. Then, with an effort, he dragged his awareness back again and began to blink at the hissing fire.

Sick, he felt, in mind and body: a heavy weight pressed down on him; his limbs ached; his eyes burned; and inside of him raged a ravenous hunger which no amount of feeding would assuage. But after a further smoke of his pipe he was able to diagnose his worried, sick, unhappy feeling as the Morning Blues; and he knew that it would soon pass.

Taking a yak-hair towel and a wooden water-holder from his tent, he walked briskly towards the posts of the stockade.

When he had swung the heavy bar aside and opened the bamboo gate he stood there for a while, looking over towards the lake and listening carefully. It was a couple of years at least since one of the yaks had come near to the stockade, but he was wary by nature. A yak would go for anything; but they were noisy animals, and their pilot-birds were noisy too, so that when a yak was about there was always plenty of warning. The man listened; but all he could hear was the distant cry of a tare-bird, the dripping of a spring emptying into the lake, and the million sipping-sounds of the wet air seeping into the soil and spilling off the tropical leafage.

Closing the gate behind him, he walked down to the lake, his wood-soled sandals making a slapping noise on the roughly paved path. All sounds seemed strangely hollow in the mist; and all distances seemed shortened so that the landscape seemed crowded; and the lake seemed crowded with the reflection of tropical monocotyledon trees.

At the edge of the lake he stood still and looked over at the barrier-hills where the giant sun showed as a blur of red fire beyond the mist. Even this early he could feel the heat of it on his face and forearms. By noon the sweat would be running out of him, lying over his shoulders like a sticky cape and aggravating the sweat-rash under his beard.

With thick fingers, he untied the cord from his waist, took off his sandals, and pulled the monk-like smock over his head. Then he started to wade out into the water until it came up to his chest.

Long ago the lake had been the means of saving his life, and over the years the morning bathe had come to be something of a ritual as well as the most enjoyable event of the day. As he splashed about like a spastic penguin, squirted water from his empty gums, and lay floating on his back in cruciform abandon, his mind bubbled into a timeless reverie which linked this present to a scrappily remembered past. He forgot for a while the tents, the stockade, the second man and the third man; he forgot the yaks, the tare-birds, the daily struggle just to keep himself alive. Only the mist he could not forget. It lay above him in the air, white and sun-pink; it seemed to penetrate down below the surface of the water along with the reflections of the surrounding trees, so that he had a sensation that he was floating in a warm, oily vapour interpenetrated by unsubstantial, thalloid fronds of algae.

Presently he thought about breakfast, and, turning in the water like a barrel, he struck out in a steady overarm for the path. With the sun hot on his bare back, he had a quick rub down with the yak-hair towel, although the coarse brown homespun was greasy and almost useless for towelling. He sat his hams down on the herbage and put his sandals on again. When the thongs were tied he walked naked to the spring to fill his bamboo water-vessel, and then, carrying his towel and smock over his shoulder, he returned to the tent.

“Eggs and bacon and coffee,” he said, when he had donned his smock and combed out his hair and beard. Only the eggs were the rubbery spawn of the tare-bird, the bacon was a hunk of smoked yak, and the coffee was brewed from ground and roasted “fern-nuts”.

While he dished up the meal he glanced across the stockade from time to time towards the other tent. He saw that the second man had lit his fire. Strange that you could hate a man so much that you couldn't bear to live with him, and yet at the same time you needed company so badly that you couldn't bear to live away from him! The third man, too, hated the second man, but he did not need anyone's company. He didn't know whether the third man was to be pitied or envied. "Takes all sorts to make a world," he said, and he did not pause to reflect upon the implication of his words.

When he had finished his meal he stuffed his pipe again with the substitute tobacco and sat down on the log near his tent. As he puffed smoke into the endless mist his thoughts switched from subject to subject. Once he had been able to discipline his thinking to some extent, but nowadays there was no purpose in doing so—there was no purpose at all in his life. He was an old man waiting for the end. What else was there to wait for? Long ago he had given up all hoping. There was nothing to life but this day by day existence—the Morning Blues, the daily swim in the lake, the chores, the afternoon delirium, the unnaturally long night of tossing sleeplessness and hateful dreams . . . the constant fear of madness.

He was getting depressed again, and work, he knew, was the only answer to that.

After knocking out his pipe he began to busy himself about the tent. He dragged out his sleeping-bag, tidied the parchments of his "log", spread out some pieces of yak skin that he was preparing for new parchments, ground up some more "fern-nuts" between a couple of stones, secured the skins of his tent, and then refilled his water-holder at the lakeside spring, finally returning to his log with the bamboo frame he used for weaving yak-hair yarn into cloth.

It was an hour or so to noon when he saw that the second man was standing in the midpoint between the tents, the place they came to when they wanted to speak to each other. He looked up eagerly, his heart pounding with excitement. Then he saw that the second man had a bow with him. That meant that he wanted him to go yak-hunting.

Careful not to show any eagerness at the prospect of intercourse with the second man, the first man got his bow and arrows from the back of his tent and strode over to the midpoint.

"Gettin' low on meat," the second man said, and the first man felt pleased. He had spoken. That meant that he was in a good mood. Sometimes the second man refused to speak and

they would go out into the jungle, kill a yak and carry it back into the stockade without saying a single word to each other.

"Me too," the first man said. He felt like talking, talking, talking. But he knew he must be careful or his companion would close up like a clam.

"Wonder where *he's* got to?" he said as they stepped out of the stockade. "It's not like him to stay away this long without paying us a visit."

"He's crazy," the second man said. The second man was tall dark and lean. And quite bald. He was dressed in a smock like the other, and a bushy black beard covered his neckline and the top of his chest.

"Maybe he's a little unbalanced," the first man said, his voice hoarse through lack of use. "But I wouldn't go so far as to say he was crazy."

"He's crazy, I said; crazy as a tare-bird!"

The first man, who was plump, with sand-coloured hair, looked up into the face of the other man and knew that if he wanted to keep things amiable he would have to be careful not to contradict him.

He ran up and swung open the stockade gate, and tried to think of something to say which would interest and not antagonise the other one.

"The mist's as thick as ever," he said as they trod warily along the spongy path that ran in line with one side of the lake. It was a silly thing to say, because the mist was always as thick as ever, it always had been from the start.

The dark man grunted.

Presently the path left the lake and swung into a jungle of bamboos, fernlike plants, palms, prickly-plums, and huge mosses, with here and there a tall flower like a yucca rising white and heavily scented in the mist. Now and then a thing like a shrew walked over the path, and on either side, hidden in the mist, a host of small birds chirruped, screeched and warbled. They were always out of sight, the small birds; only the larger tare-bird, clumsy and bedraggled, and in appearance something like a duck-sized starling, showed itself to the men as they made their way past the dripping fronds of foliage. The tare-bird was as tame as the phalarope, and several times the two men almost trod on one as they advanced. The plump, sandy man was reminded once again of some lines from *The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk*:

“ The beasts that roam over the plain  
My form with indifference see;  
They are so unacquainted with man,  
Their tameness is shocking to me.”

Of course no one would describe the yak as tame. But it was the only animal in the vicinity large enough and plentiful enough to provide a constant meat supply. The third man had called it a yak long ago and the name had stuck to it although it was more like a horned tiger. As well as providing meat the yak gave the men skins for their tents and clothing, fat for candles, sharp horns for tools, strong gut for lines and bowstrings, hair for nets and cloth; and the skin of the young yak made an excellent parchment.

They came across an adult yak after about half an hour's walk through the jungle. Long before they saw it they heard it crashing through the trees somewhere ahead of them and making the hound-like baying noise which still had the power of inducing an ache of fear into the plump man's stomach. Fitting an arrow to his bow, he went forward warily.

“ There he is!” the dark man said. He often became talkative at the prospect of a dangerous kill. “ Under the nut-fern there! Look, he's seen us. Come on my beauty, come on!”

The yak had its head lowered, so that its horns, like dull scimitars, were pointed towards the men. Its eyes were hidden behind its fringe of russet hair. Its pilot-bird had left its shoulders and was perched in the nut-fern gibbering angrily.

“ Come on my beauty!” the dark man said. He loosed an arrow which thudded against the bony forehead of the beast and fell to the ground. The yak began to roar. The pilot-bird continued its gibbering; and the dark man, with the ease of frequent practice, slid another arrow to the string of his bow.

After a particularly loud scream from the pilot-bird the yak began to advance. Slowly, and with a nightmarish confidence in its own invincibility, it moved from side to side of the path, slashing with its horns like twin rip-hooks. The pilot-bird screamed again and the beast began to run. Save for the sounds of the yak and its pilot-bird, the jungle had gone silent as though the creatures living there were capable of seeing across a distance through the mist and heavy leafage, to witness the impending conflict on the ancient jungle path.

The plump man stepped aside and crouched low, and when

the yak was twenty yards away, he sent an arrow at its throat. The beast changed direction and while the first man was fitting his second arrow his companion sent one unerringly into the yak's throat from the other side.

In a few minutes the beast was down, and then the dark man was astride it, forcing his knife in under the ear just behind the jawbone. The yak died. The pilot-bird went silent on the fern, and while the dark man wiped the blood from his knife and his hands, the first man, sweating and slightly trembling, gathered up the arrows and laid them down beside the second man's bow.

It was noon, and the big sun seemed to fill the misty heavens. Its rays poured down on the men like liquid fire as they lashed the yak's legs together, cut a bamboo pole and pushed it between the lashings, and then, with the pole sagging heavily between their shoulders, trudged back to the stockade with the abusive cry of the tare-birds loud in their ears.

The heat made further effort impossible. They covered the carcase with cloths and each returned to his tent to lie down in a joyless siesta until the comparative cool of the evening.

The long afternoon passed as a sweat-slimed delirium. Everything was stewed into silence under the broiling sun. The terrain swayed and toppled in waves of heat, producing mirage upon mirage. The jungle wilted. Under its basting of fiery mist the lake steamed like a vast cauldron and gave out a stench of hot putrescence, like the cesspit of hell.

Even the tent-skins seemed to sweat, and the man stretched naked on top of his sleeping-bag, writhed and twitched from side to side and gulped for air.

Some time past mid afternoon he fell head over heels into a troubled sleep, to wake in the evening in a bath of sweat and with a mouth like a nest of cinders.

He got up and rinsed his mouth and drank some of the tepid water remaining in his water-holder. And then, after donning his smock, he went into the centre of the stockade and helped the second man to skin and carve up the yak they had killed that morning.

After his evening meal he sat on his bamboo log weaving cloth until the light failed; and then he banked up his fire and worked by the red light of the blaze.

The moths came out with the nightfall. Moths with wings of silver veined with gold; beautiful and silent they came out of the misty jungle and fluttered in their hundreds round the fire which flashed on their wings and opalescent bodies giving them the

appearance of large fireflies, or scraps of silver paper whirling in the air.

While he was sitting watching them and puffing at his pipe he heard a yodelling from outside the stockade; and joyfully he got up and hurried to the gate to welcome the third man—the wanderer.

The third man was the youngest of the trio; and he had always been the adventurous one. While the other two had been content to consolidate their position by the lake, he had wandered abroad studying the terrain, the plants and the birds and animals. And while the other two had exploited the yak he had experimented with a variety of fruits and vegetables, developing a strange intuition concerning what was poisonous and what was nourishing. He had been the first one to eat a prickly plum and to cure and smoke the local weed they used for tobacco.

He came into the stockade now, and he and the first man shook hands warmly and patted each other on the back.

"So he hasn't cut your throat yet?" he asked when the first greetings were over.

They walked into the firelight and stood side by side with the moths fluttering about them like the sounds of some great orchestra made visible in silver, red and gold. The third man was lean and fair. His beard was straggly, and his hair came a long way down his back. Instead of wearing a smock like the others, he had on a pair of soiled and ragged trousers, and a long yak-skin cape. A fur shako was perched rakishly on his head; and his legs and feet were bound in strips of rawhide. He carried a long spear in his hand; and round his waist he wore a belt from which hung a number of pouches and a bamboo waterholder.

"No," the plump man said, grinning toothlessly. "We get on much the same as we always have done."

"He hasn't altered then?"

"Here he comes now!"

They turned towards the dark man who was approaching across the stockade with the emphatic bearlike tread of a big man prepared for trouble.

"So you've come back again!"

With a patient smile the third man spread his arms out and tilted his spear. "Yes, as you see. The lost sheep has returned to the fold—for one night only."

"Where've you been this time?" the plump one put in hastily in an effort to keep the peace between the other two.

"Over the hills and far away."

"The barrier-hills?"

The third man nodded and then pushed the shako further to the side of his head.

"Ach!" the dark one said. "You must be crazy."

"What's it like over there?" the plump man asked; but the wanderer ignored him and said in a high voice. "Crazy, am I? You're a fine one to talk. And what does it matter anyway? Craziness and sanity are things that don't apply here . . ." He broke off angrily and said, "Oh, why should I bother to argue with you?"

The dark man stepped towards him; and with a lightning movement the wanderer brought down the point of his spear until it was an inch from the other's smock-cord. For a few seconds the dark man stood there with his mouth moving speechlessly, then he turned round and began to stride away in the direction of his own tent. They saw the firelight shining for a moment on the back of his bald head, and then they ignored him, and the plump man went into his tent and came out a few minutes later with a large bamboo section with a wooden bung protruding from a hole in the top of it.

"Let's try a taste of my prickle-plum wine!"

He went back in the tent again and came out with a couple of drinking vessels, and then when he had lowered the net behind him to keep the moths out of the tent, he poured out a couple of generous measures of wine.

Until late into the night they kept the fire blazing, while they drank the bitter wine and talked of old times, and the third man spoke of the things he had seen in his wanderings. The mist came down low over the stockade—the atmosphere gelled into a solid, shimmering mass of mist, smoke and fireglow, and bright whirling moths.

They said good-night, and the wanderer kipped down on his cloak beside the fire; and the other, before getting into his sleeping-bag, brought a heap of parchments over to the firelight, and with a quill pen dipped in the reddish ink made from a local clay wrote up his "log".

Day 7300.

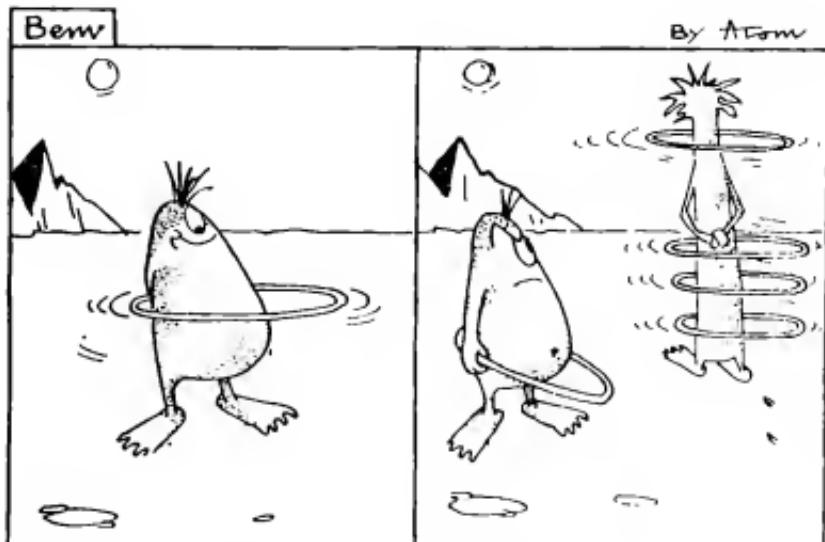
The three survivors of the *Starhopper* are still in good health after exactly twenty planet years on this unnamed world. Today the cook and I had a rare visit from the hydroponics man, who still spends most of his time wandering in the jungle.

We are gradually becoming nameless like the planet, because, I suppose, there is no need for any names when there are only three people in a whole world.

For a while he sat in the hissing firelight, fingering the parchments. It was all there—the story of the three men who had survived when the *Starhopper*, two days after an emergency landing on the planet, had blown up and completely disintegrated, annihilating all hands except the three who had been bathing in the lake. It was a story of survival against terrific odds. And it proved that without any tools or weapons save those they made themselves, without drugs or skilled surgery, without machines or books, without hope of rescue, even without women, men can exist for long periods on an alien world.

The universe is wide. The worlds are more numerous than midges on a summer's night. But one day other earthmen would tread the soil of that misty world of the tare-bird, the nut-fern and the yak; and they would read of the struggles of the three survivors of the *Starhopper* and marvel at man's powers of endurance.

W. T. WEBB



# Song of Ages

*The Earth was littered with the evidences of a former civilisation. Had its builders also conquered space?*

Captain Tashker glared at young Hewson. "Of course there's been no previous expansion of Earth into the galaxy!" Captain Tashker was stout and formidable and perpetually short of breath. "You youngsters are all alike; don't give a damn for the facts, just leap off harum-scarum to your own conclusions."

I looked across sympathetically at Hewson. He was a newly-fledged architectural engineer on leave from the European Ocean project, and a fresh member of the famous South Pole Club. He'd been agog with the vast city ruins discovered under the European Sea just north of the Alps. Now he tried to argue with Captain Tashker.

"But both Terrans and the Sarno have run across evidence of previous galactic civilisations——"

"Poppycock! And, anyway, even if they have, does that prove those old civilisations belonged to Earth?"

The group around the club's TV lost interest in a rocket derby relayed from a system six hundred light years off. They transferred themselves, smiling happily at what was to come, to strategic positions around the gallant captain.

Tashker brayed his ear-thrumming laugh. "Our culture is the first from Earth to reach the stars, youngster."

"That may be true, Tashker," said Kimball, a gambling man, and, like Captain Tashker, a retired Space Navy officer. "But what about that affair you had with the Sarno on—where was it—?"

"Trabert's Planet."

"Trabert's Planet. Didn't you drag the old Earth culture business in then?"

Tashker laughed. A large man, he laughed with everything. "That's right. Put one over the Sarno that time. Serve 'em damn well right."

"The war's over now, Tashker." Kimball sounded just like Tashker might have, speaking those terrible words.

"What happened there, then?" asked young Hewson, buying Tashker another rum toddy. He wanted to prove his argument.

"What about that Armistice Commission?" asked Kimball.

I switched off the TV and found a seat from which I could see Tashker's profile. The noble captain was always good for a yarn, even if he missed the essential points in it. Hewson was young and impetuous; Kimball willing to stake his next month's retirement pay on the throw of dice. It would be interesting to see what transpired.

Tashker's story was simple enough. He'd been first lieutenant of the old *Samon*, a second class cruiser on patrol for a clear eighteen months without a planetfall. When the order was received aboard to call on Trabert's Planet where a combined Armistice Commission was trying to decide who the planet belonged to everyone talked darkly about mutiny and a quick return to Earth.

"Captain Bailey—he was killed later on trying to bring in a crippled battleship without tugs—was as mad as any of us," Tashker rumbled on. "All we wanted to do was to give the planet to Earth or Sarno and then blast off for home. There was a young middy in my watch, reminds me of you, Hewson, young and eager and still wet behind the ears; anyway, he became very friendly with the natives of Trabert's Planet."

Hewson retained his youthful dignity. "What were they like?" he asked, drawing Tashker away from personalities.

"Just like us and the Sarno. Couldn't tell 'em five feet off."

"Just what I said," interrupted Hewson. "That's as good a proof as any intelligent man needs. You don't expect to find aliens in the galaxy just the same as us physiologically, do you? The odds are millions against."

"Rubbish!" Tashker fell back onto his prepared defences in

any argument. "Poppycock! They lived on a planet not unlike Earth so they developed like Earthmen." He ploughed on in his yarn now, unstoppably. "Young Varende was always off with the natives every shore leave, hobnobbing with them. He learned their language, too. We had the old transgal machines; but of course they were useless where a prior knowledge of the language was lacking. Our Lingua Galactica was gibberish to them until Varende translated. Even the Sarno didn't seem to get on as well with the locals as young Varende. We'd been fighting the Sarno all over space up until six months before and it was strange to walk around the little local villages with the late enemy.

"The Armistice Commission was sorting out various planets in dispute between Earth and Sarno. Trabert's planet was a sticky problem because it hadn't been involved in the war and both sides claimed it entirely as theirs. No one on the Commission was getting anywhere. The old *Samon* and a spanking brand new Sarno battle-wagon glowered at each other and the delegates bickered and the natives carried on as though they didn't give a damn who their planet belonged to."

Hewson put a young man's point of view. "I'd think that the planet belonged to them. What were they called?"

Tashker guffawed. He carried on: "I told you what their name was; Angsh—a damned outlandish name that Varende told us meant 'people of the world'—when he was aboard ship, that was. He spent nearly all his time with the Angsh in their wooden villages. And I was getting sicker and sicker of just sitting there and doing nothing.

"One day Captain Bailey told me that if no proof could be found, one way or another, to decide to whom the planet belonged, they'd split it down the middle."

"That's always a bad solution," Hewson said.

"So I thought, youngster. I was keen in those days. And what with the war being over I felt I ought to do my bit for old Earth. I must admit that I was more keen on blasting off for home than in what happened to one measly planet in the galaxy. So when young Varende played some recordings he made of the Angsh singing I couldn't be bothered. Then he said that they were singing traditional songs of a religious significance—and no one knew what the words meant.

"How d' you mean, youngster?" I asked him not really caring.

"They sing these old songs during their ceremonies." He was

all worked up about it. 'They use a language that none of them knows. It must be incredibly ancient, sir.' I listened to the recordings; hell of a row. All wailing and chanting like black magic."

Tashker lay back in his chair and laughed. "That, young Hewson, is when I remembered the fancy stories that you've been trotting out tonight. I never thought I'd hear them brought forward seriously again."

"Fancy or not, sir, serious archaeological enquiry——"

"Fancy stories, young 'un! Fairy tales! But you must understand that we were sick and tired of space and of alien planets. We all wanted good old Earth. So I persuaded Varende to take me to one of the Angsh's religious parties. It was quite a ball."

Tashker smiled reflectively. "I made a few arrangements before we set off. I remember that I'd strapped on a service pistol, just to be on the safe side, you know, and young Varende kicked up an awful fuss. Said that the gun would be useless where we were going. He refused to start at all until I'd taken the thing off. Still, I had a second inside my uniform jacket, and I didn't tell the lad that.

"We went off when the sun was setting. I carried the equipment in a duffle bag and the going was tough. I can remember now the way the vines lashed at us and the insects that swarmed out when the sun sank. Varende led me through the damp darkness to the river where some natives were waiting with a local motorboat— incredibly ancient external combustion steam engine driving it. We made a wonderful glow going up the river, masses of sparks and clouds of smoke. I coughed enough that night to last a lifetime.

"It was damper and more stifling than the heart of the Sahara jungle. I can tell you I was wishing I was back aboard ship before we'd been gone a couple of hours. As for being here in the South Pole Club—well, that was beyond my wildest dreams. I never thought I'd see green fields and trout streams again, I can tell you.

"We reached a village where we had to leave the little boat and then we had to walk—walk, mind you! I was cursing Varende by this time and heartily sick of my desire to help out Earth.

"Then I recalled that if I didn't go through with my plan we might be stuck here for another year—and so I pressed on in the darkness, with only a battery-powered torch for light, in the wake of Varende, cursing the insects and the humidity and the darkness. That was some journey!"

Captain Tashker squirmed in his seat; it was evident that he would never forget the experience. A fresh rum toddy was dialled and brought and he went on speaking.

"We reached the valley in the hills at last. There were thousands of the Angsh. They were carrying torches and shouting and singing and waving banners. We mingled with those on the outskirts of the throng and waited our time. Young Varendе felt badly about my plan; but he was realist enough to see that it was a fool-proof—well nearly fool-proof—way of settling the dispute and getting us off the planet and back home.

"Presently a big-wig, a high priest or some sort of chieftain, called for order. The Angsh quietened down and then they began a whole series of responses in wavering tones, shouting them out in reply to questions put by the big chief. I asked Varendе what they were saying and he told me: 'No one knows, sir! The language hasn't been used by the Angsh for years—no one alive has the slightest idea what it means.'

"At that I undid my pack and duffle bag and started to assemble the equipment. Varendе didn't like it; but he helped me. There in the darkness lit only by the streaky flames of torches, we assembled a Terran mass-broadcast mentahypnosis rig. It wasn't too difficult, even though our fingers were trembling with excitement.

"When the Angsh began singing, Varendе nodded. I switched the machine on."

Captain Tashker's eyes were wide open, sitting in his chair in the South Pole Club; but it was manifestly clear to all of us that he was back there in that valley in the hills of an alien planet, surrounded by aliens all singing and chanting songs which no one alive understood.

At last he resumed his story. "When we had dosed them well and truly, they began to sing words we could understand; words of an old song I'd remembered from childhood days. The mentahypnosis rig was imposing our will on them. They didn't realise it, of course. They still couldn't understand what they were singing—but we could!

"We were packing up the gear and preparing to sneak off when someone spotted that we weren't quite playing the game, or acting in the way they expected. All I remember is seeing Varendе arguing with them and then an ugly rush with a couple of big fellows in front with—of all things—bows and arrows.

"Varendе shouted to me to run. I ran just far enough to open a clear field of fire and then I dropped the two leading

aliens. Varende gave a muffled sob and ran past me. He was in a terrible state. Youngsters shouldn't get so wrapped up in things they don't understand. Anyway, we got clear before the Angsh could bring up some steam cannon they had; nasty things, made a hell of a racket."

"Then what happened?" asked Hewson. He hadn't missed any of Tashker's digs at youth.

"Why, we made it back to the ship—walked all the way back to the river where I slung the mentahypnosis gear in and then started to walk along the bank. Daren't trust the steam boat any more. By the time dawn came up we were both pretty well beat up. Then a Sarno airboat spotted us and swooped down. We told 'em we'd been out on a botanical expedition and had lost our gear in the river."

Tashker shook his head sadly. "That was a mistake. I tried to tell lies as near to the truth as possible ; this time it was too near. The Sarno was very polite, very concerned, gave us hot toddy and saw us safely back to the old *Samon*. We ducked straight back to our cabins and slept right through the day.

"But those damned helpful Sarno went back and used a detector in the river. Of course, we didn't know that then. I told the skipper about what we'd done and he told the chief of the Terran Armistice Commission. A big conference was arranged. Earth put forward her claims. 'This planet was one of those colonised by Earth in the old times,' the chief said. 'Our ancestors came here and settled down and then lost contact with mother Earth. Only her songs and her religion remained. Today, the native Anksh sing the old songs of Earth.' Then he invited a couple of dozen Angsh to sing in the choir and they obliged and sang the jolly little song we'd pumped into them.

"It would have worked, too. You could have fanned those Sarno officials to sleep when they heard what the Angsh were singing. They jumped up and down, and shouted at one another and the natives went on carolling at the tops of their voices over it all. It was a ball.

"The Earth delegates were getting ready to sign and seal the deeds to the planet when a group of Sarno navymen walked in. As soon as I saw what they were carrying I knew the game was up."

"The mentahypnosis machine?" said Kimball.

"That's why you never made it beyond Commander, Kimball," Tashker said. "What did you think they'd be bringing in, the day's laundry?"

"The mentahypnosis machine. Trying to be helpful to us and to find our botanists' gear, they'd dug up the evidence that wrecked our scheme. There was quite a hullabaloo, too, I recall."

Tashker took a long reflective pull at his rum toddy. A little silence fell.

Then Hewson said: "What happened to Trabert's Planet?"

"Oh," said Tashker. "They split it up. Earth and Sarno each own a half. But it was a good try, a good try."

I refrained from commenting that that was perhaps why Tashker had never made it beyond captain. Instead, just as I was about to lean forward and put the question that had always puzzled me in this story, Hewson asked it for me.

"And what happened to young Varende?"

"He's Commodore Varende now, and in line for Admiral early next year. I exonerated him completely, of course. Took the blame myself. Well—had to, didn't I?"

So Tashker wasn't all bluff and brawn, after all.

"And what about his work with the Angsh? Was anything ever discovered about the real language that they had once spoken and now forgot?"

"Of course not! All they were singing was pure gibberish; didn't mean a thing. You can't convince me, Hewson, that we aren't the first race off Earth and into the Galaxy."

"But you said Varende thought it was a language."

"Gibberish."

"But if they'd really colonised the planet from Earth and forgotten their old language, and spoke something that wasn't Lingua Galactica, then perhaps—"

"Poppycock! Rubbish! It was a parcel of gibberish." Tashker reached for his dialling control. "Here, hang on, I'll play you a recording Varende left me." He dialled and the robots produced the recording and machine from his home a thousand miles away.

"This'll prove it," he said confidently, operating the machine.

We all clustered closer. The machine whirred into life. There rolled out the sound of drums beating and the shouting of many voices. The sound was alien and chill in that warm South Pole clubroom.

A chant began, thousands of throats fully extended, singing a marching song. I felt profound disappointment. Gibberish—completely unintelligible.

Hewson sagged back, deflated.

We sat there, with the green and verdant valleys of Earth's

South Pole Continent about us, listening to the alien chanting of aliens from an alien planet.

The unintelligible words sounded, as near as I could understand them, like: "Onward Krischan Sol oldyers Mah Ahching asta Wore. . . ."

Completely unintelligible. Gibberish.  
Alien.

**H. PHILIP STRATFORD**

## THE NEXT ISSUE

What would really happen if a strange spacecraft was to land in a remote rural area, and it became apparent that its occupant was totally alien? This question is used by William F. Temple as the basis for one of the most realistic and sympathetically written short stories he has yet produced. Specially written for our magazine, this is only one of the many good things lined up for your reading enjoyment in NEBULA No. 42.

Other stories in the same issue include a first-class yarn by E. R. James, dealing with the difficulties encountered by the colonists of a frontier world having only limited resources, who discover soon after touchdown that a rival colony is already in the process of being established; a lyrically colourful, yet wistfully sad tale by Edward Mackin of a last-ever holiday spent on a truly alien planet; plus other contrasting and memorable short stories by Robert Presslie, Ian Wright, Nigel Jackson and Sydney Bounds.

Order NEBULA No. 42 from your newsagent or bookseller to-day. It will be on sale in September.

# Cadet

*The boy had a lot to learn about becoming an Ordinary Spaceman . . . the trouble was he also had a lot to teach*

*Illustration by John J. Greengrass*

Sam Beguid watched the Grid-Transport bus with dull-indifference, which sharpened, suddenly, as he saw it slide to a stop about a hundred feet clear of the end of the gangway. Here, in the "tramp's corner" of the Durango Grid, where the pens were huddled at quarter-mile intervals, the bus seldom stopped, except to unload a returning crew.

Sam shifted his considerable weight from one arm to the other, got a fresh grip on the sliver of glasstex that he used as a toothpick, and leaned once more on the guardrail, watching the passenger who had got down from the bus. The man was tall. Silver-grey coveralls flapped about his skinny frame as he stepped briskly towards the gangway. His black cap had a glint of gold that caught the sunlight as his head turned from side to side in a quick survey.

Sam frowned, pushed his own battered cap further back on his balding head, and moved the two steps needed to bring him to the top of the gangway.

"You looking for somebody, mister?" he asked, surveying the stranger keenly. This close, he could see that the visitor was little more than a boy, for all his rawboned size. No more than twenty-two or three—except for the eyes, which were cold, pale grey—and they looked right through Sam. Not offensively, but as if there was nothing to stop them.

"Where will I find the senior executive officer aboard?" The voice was quiet, yet anxious.

"That's me!" Sam told him, tersely. "Nobody else aboard but me, in fact. Name's Beguid—Sam Beguid—quartermaster, store-keeper, odd-jack—sort of general factotum, you might say. What can I do for you?"

The youth dumped the grip he was carrying, and stiffened into a whippy salute.

"Cadet Grant!" he said, smartly. "New crew-member, reporting. Happy to be aboard!"

Sam stood a moment, completely dumbfounded, then scrambled to square off his cap and return the salute. He felt like a fool, doing it, but there was something about the cadet that demanded to be taken seriously.

"Beguid?" the youngster repeated, pushing a bunch of flimsies into Sam's nerveless hand. "Isn't that Anglo-Scottish, meaning 'be good'?"

"Yeah!" Sam took the papers, unwillingly. "It's a bit of a change to hear somebody get it right, first time. Mostly, folks call me 'Sam' to my face, and 'Big-Head' when my back's turned. Don't bother me none, though." He looked at the handful of paper, and shook his head.

"Sure you have the right ship, son?" he demanded. "This is a 'C' Class freighter—we don't have anything so swell as a training franchise—Holy Cow—!" He ran a practised eye swiftly over the documents, past the standards—the Application, clearances, agreement, authorisation—to the Identification—"an I.S.C. Cadet! From the Academy?" Despite himself, there was awe in his voice. The cadet looked embarrassed. Sam looked again at the documents, unbelievingly. Michael Upjohn Grant—age twenty-two—height 75"—weight 175 lbs.—all the minor details—Sam memorised them automatically, as fodder for future gossip. He flipped to the "agreement." It was simple, and standard—and there was the Old Man's signature, at the foot. C. A. Upjohn—a heavy, untidy scrawl.

"Well, I'm damned!" he sighed, shoving back his cap again—then

a stray thought became hooked in his mind, and he looked again at the signatures. You call a man "Old Jackup" affectionately, then automatically—and you tend to forget his right name. Upjohn! Michael Upjohn Grant!

"You kin to the 'Old Man'?"

"He's my uncle—" Grant nodded, still in that anxious tone, "but I was hoping to keep quiet about that."

"It certainly wouldn't help you none!" Sam agreed, then scratched his head, vigorously. "Imagine! Old Jackup with a nephew in the Academy! I never knew he *had* a nephew. Never knew he had any kin-folk at all, come to that—" Sam was aggrieved. He had the conviction, not without reason, that he knew just about everything there was to be known about the rest of the crew.

"All right—" he sighed. "You're safe with me. I've been the wailing-wall on this tub long enough now to know how to keep my trap shut. But—I still think there's something screwy about all this. An Academy cadet—on the 'Junket'? It don't make sense. And you're a clear day ahead of time, too—did you know that? The rest of the gang won't blow into Durango City till to-morrow—and they won't be aboard till to-morrow night—"

"I know—I wanted to have an advance look round—get the feel of things, as this is my first ship-out. Will that be all right?"

"Don't see why not." Sam frowned again, still not satisfied. "You want me to show you round—explain things?"

"I'd hate to trouble you. If I might nose around by myself—?"

"Suit yourself! But I better show you a cabin, first. Come on—" He led off, across the main hold, down the centre-stem to the living deck, and to the door of the emergency cabin.

"Last-minute jump," he said, sliding the door open. Grant looked his bewilderment, so Sam explained: "Space-reg. All ships to keep one cabin in immediate readiness for emergency lifts. We're not too strong on reg's, on the Junket, but that's one we don't duck. Emergency lifts pay off high, as a rule—" He made a mental note to get another partition rigged and fitted, ready for the possible emergency. The cadet felt the bunk, experimentally, tossed his cap on it, and put down his grip. Sam noticed that he was panting as if he had come a long way.

"A bit out of shape, ain't you, for a young 'un?!"

"Must be the altitude," the cadet mumbled. "We're pretty high up here, aren't we?!"

"Now look—" Sam rested his rear on the bunk and regarded the



cadet, kindly—"you can cut that out, son, for a start. I don't figure your game yet, but don't overplay it. This is your first ship—but you're an Academy cadet—and they're not stupid, by all I've heard—and every schoolboy, all over the world, knows about the Durango Grid—off by heart—a twenty-mile-a-side equilateral triangle of pool-table-flat concrete—eight thousand feet above sea level—"

"I'm sorry—" Grant looked more anxious then ever. "Perhaps I am trying too hard. I don't want to get off on the wrong foot and act like a big-head—gosh! I'm sorry!—I didn't mean—"

"It's all right," Sam reassured. "I know what you mean—but you'll never get away with it. The boys ain't what you'd call brilliant, but they are sure as hell going to be suspicious of a cadet—on this ship. You don't belong here!"

"But I want to. I want to be just one of the crew, Mr. Beguid—to live their life, do the things they do, think the way they think—"

"Why?" Sam demanded, flatly, and Grant hunched his bony shoulders.

"Well—I owe a lot to Uncle Charles, you know. He paid my entrance fees to the Academy—just to please my mother. The least

I can do is to ship out with him on my first commission. That's what I said when I had my interview with him."

"What'd he say to that?"

"Well—" The cadet went a faint pink. "He said—ship with me, my lad, and you'll be just a snot-nosed trainee, so far as I'm concerned. All that book-learning'll never make you a space-man—but, by God, I will—if you've the guts to take it—" Sam hid a grin, as he visualised Old Jackup delivering that line.

"So—" the youth concluded, with great determination. "That's the way I want it to be—just one of the gang."

Sam pondered this. It sounded all right, but his instinct for intrigue told him there was more. He got up from the bunk, handling the shiny new cap.

"You willing to take a bit of advice?"

Grant nodded, cautiously.

"All right. First—ditch this bonnet. Hide it some place and get yourself something old and battered, or go bareheaded. Get a sweat-shirt in place of that fashion-model you're wearing—and get some genuine grease and dirt rubbed into those coveralls—"

"Oh—" The cadet looked down at his beautiful newness and nodded. "I see what you mean. Thanks—!"

"Forget it. Look—it's four-thirty. I reckon to eat about seven. If you can find your way back to the top of the gangway by that time, I'll take you across to 4-Block Diner. That's where we eat, in this billet—"

After the kid had gone, Sam sat awhile, looking at the cap in his hands, and recalling what little he had heard about the Academy. It was the first time he had seen the Interplanetary Space Corps insignia close—the interlaced initials, in gold wire—and a slim red-and-gold circle holding the whole thing together.

There were rumours of fabulously severe qualifications—how super-expert the final products were—and the Corps doctrine—that the real brains of space-flight stayed on the ground—anyone could fly ships here and there—but it took real brain to design them, to keep them flying, to maintain efficient organisation, routing, flight programmes—Sam knew that much—and sneered at it, along with every other professional space-farer. Those chair-borne experts really fancied themselves!

All the same, though, Space-Corps men seldom went into space—and never, under any circumstances, on a heap like the Junket. Even her own crew called her the Junkyard. His habitual curiosity burned

enormously in the draught of such tantalising fare. He dropped the cap on the bunk, went to the grip, which was just inside the door. It might just come open in his hands, accidentally. He went to lift it, and gasped.

"Holy Cow!" he grunted, heaving hard. "So that's why he was blowing. What in time has he got in here?" It wanted only a moment or two of crafty manipulation, then Sam had another shock. "Books!" he growled, scanning the spines, and moving his lips in an effort to pronounce the titles—"The Physical Origin of Adaptation by Trial-and-Error" was an easy one—but "The Neurological and Behaviouristic Psychological Basis of the Ordering of Society" had him worried, and the next—"The Place of Emotions in the Feed-Back Concept" made him shake his head in despair. They didn't sound like the kind of books a greenhorn cadet would want on a space-freighter.

"Michael Upjohn Grant," he mumbled, "you're quite a boy—all frail and innocent-looking—" A little lamp went on in his mind, and he reviewed those initials again. "M.U.G., mug—" Hmmm! We'll see who's the mug, around here—"

He went as far as the Skipper's cabin, filed the flimsies away, then hurried back to his own quarters, to search out an address. Then he got out a fono-tape.

"Barney Curran—hello—" he said into the microphone. "Long time no see—and don't think I'm enquiring after your health, you old unprintable ——, but I heard you landed a real soft snap—janitor or some such to those young squirts at the Academy. Something you can do for me. We just took aboard a young feller by the name of Grant—Michael Upjohn Grant—"

The new boy appeared prompt at seven, and Sam walked him across the half-mile of concrete to the diner. Michael was considerably grubbier than he had been, and his tow-coloured thatch stood up in spikes, but he still had his anxious, wide-eyed expression. When the first pangs had been dulled, Sam leaned back in his chair to look up, through the glass roof, at the enormous pylons which soared into the clouds.

"Anything you want to know about the Grid—" he offered, "just ask. I know her history pretty well. I was aboard the first ship that was thrown off from here, you know—"

It was a mistake. Sam had hoped he might glean something from the kind of questions Michael would ask—but there weren't any. The boy not only knew all that Sam knew about the Grid, but a lot

more that Sam had not suspected—and he insisted on telling it, all through the meal. Having dealt with the four years of planning and eight years actually building, he launched into the sociology of the thing.

"You know," he said, waving a fork, "the whole thing was originally devised by a fiction-writer—just like so many other things—like submersibles, and air-craft, and rockets, and the ion-drive—even space-travel itself—and then, in the sixties, when they finally decided that military warfare was insane, they had such a lot of potential, material and manpower at a standstill that they were all set to tackle something really big—and they had the gyro-gravity effect, which could neutralise weight, but not inertia—and propulsion-drive was still full of bugs in atmosphere—so the climate was right for some way of getting clear of the Earth by some other method—and they dug up the planetary-grid theory. You know why they decided to build the first one here?"

Sam smothered his growing irritation, and decided he knew the answer to that one, all right. Here, in Durango State, you could place a twenty-mile-sided slab of concrete, half a mile thick, right on the Tropic of Cancer line—a pre-set base for calculations.

"That's only part of it—" Michael assured him. "Just think of the Grid itself. The three corner pylons are seventy-five miles high; three miles deep into the mountain; laced with cables; so designed that whichever way the jet-stream blows, the planer surfaces balance out the thrust—that's a lot of steel—"

"Dammit, Mike—" Sam spluttered, "I know that—you'd have to be a dumb cluck not to see it. Must run into millions of tons—"

"And where did it come from—? Did you know that, just the other side of Durango City, there used to be a hill called the Cerro del Marcado? Practically solid iron ore, it was—estimated at 300,000,000 tons. That's why they picked this place. You know how they tap the ionic layer for—"

"Now see here, Mike!" Sam wasn't sure whether to be mad or amused. "You're going too far the other way, now. If you really want to pass yourself off as one of the boys, quit being such an eager-beaver about things—unless it's a hobby of some kind, maybe—"

"You mean"—the anxious young face was troubled—"they're not interested in the job? None of them?"

"Nothing to be interested in, son. Not like one of your trim ships, like the 'Ulysses' over there"—he nodded to where, through the

glass, they could see in the far distance the towering grace of an "A" Class luxury cruiser, readying for jump-off. "Those birds are forever sweating on split-second schedules—bucking for glory and promotion. That's where you should be, Mike—"

The cadet's face blanked, as if he had shut the door of his mind. The rest of the meal was silent. Sam walked him back to the ship and left him to his own devices; saw nothing more of him until the next morning, at breakfast.

"I've been checking round," the youth announced. "I've been all through your stores."

"The hell you have!"

"Yes—they're in a terrible state!"

Sam swallowed a mouthful of bacon and egg, gulped painfully, chased the lump down with coffee, and glared.

"Who gave you any permission to poke your snoot into my stores?" he demanded. "And what d'you mean—they're in a state, hey?"

"The whole ship's in a shocking mess," Michael retorted, whipping out a much-crumpled list. "You listen to this. Main Control—the Grid-Field line-up indicator is corroded solid—so are the three spares in your stores. At least four banks of relays in the course-distance computer are sub-standard—you couldn't depend on the last five places of decimals at all—and the spares are duff. The 002 register is junk, as is the one in hydroponics. The cartridge is dead—and the wiring is rotten. The four spare cartridges in stores are ten years old—and their estimated effective life is only two years—" He drew a breath and went on.

"Rest of the ship is as bad. Hydroponics space—all the tank thermometers are junk—so are your spares. The analysis cabinet is empty. By the smell of it, it has been used as a liquor store. Heaven knows how long since anyone did an algae-protein test—because you haven't any replacement reagents, at all. The power room—the gyro-grav synchroscope is—"

"Hey!" Sam got his breath back. "Just a minute—what d'you fancy this is—the 'Star Queen'? Making all that stink about nothing. Who cares about all that junk?"

"But you've just done a routine refit!" The cadet was shrill. "All those things should have been reported and dealt with—!"

"And who would foot the bill? Old Jackup. He'd have my blood if I put all that lot on the bill. We're in business, son—not flag-carrying. We show a profit—or we don't go. Besides—none of that

junk matters a damn. I bet you didn't find anything wrong with the 'Drive'—eh?"

Sam watched him look down at his list, heard the incredulity in his tone as he repeated the items, and waved them aside.

"Nothing to it," he declared. "Maybe it's tough for you, fresh out of school—but look—Old Jackup slips us into magnetic-lock by feel—what's five thousand miles here or there when you're aiming at something the size of Titan or Ganymede? You fiddle the rest of the way by sight, anyway. As for the 'ponics—old Harmony, our farmer—he can judge the air by smell a damn sight better than any gauge, believe me—and who needs an analysis to tell whether the mush is fit to eat—?"

Sam got his good humour back with a rush as he saw the thunderstruck expression on the cadet's face.

"Relax, Mike," he chuckled. "We've been taking the *Junket* away and bringing her right back for twenty years now. There's nothing wrong with the old girl. They built them ships to last, son. I reckon she'd fly herself, given half a chance—"

"Oh—" Michael said, softly. "Maybe that's the answer—and so simple, after all—"

"Eh?" Sam was immediately agog. "What was that?" But the cadet shut up determinedly. He sat in thought awhile, then—

"Sam—how do we draw stores?"

"Sign for 'em, over to the Maintenance Sheds. Something you want?"

"I'll make a list. I'm going to replace everything that's defective."

"You're nuts. The Old Man would skin me—"

"Charge it to me. I have a grant, from the Academy—"

"You have a **WHAT?**" Sam spilled his coffee all down his front.

"An expense allowance—never mind about that. Let's go—"

Sam went, unbelievably. He saw the cadet produce a pretty green chit and go into a huddle with the main storekeeper. He helped load the truck, and unload it at the gangway. Then he found his tongue.

"Mike—what the hell—this stuff must have cost plenty—what's the big idea?"

The youth gave Sam that see-through look.

"You said the ship would fly herself—that nothing ever goes wrong. Well—maybe it will, one of these days—you never know—"

Sam stared, and then, as understanding began to break through, he felt slightly sick. So this was what the Academy turned out. First time out—and, sure enough, the *Junket* didn't look very imposing—

but the kid was just plain scared. That's all it was. He shrugged it off and gave a hand with the crates.

For the rest of the day he kept out of the cadet's way, let him get on with his self-imposed task of getting the ship fit for space. The evening shadows were dragging their fingers across the concrete, though the Grid still stood golden in the sun, as the rest of the crew came reluctantly back aboard. Harmon Rockwell—black as the ace of spades and six foot seven of brawn and grin—was the first to hear about the new boy. Ryan and Edwards, the two sub-engineers, arrived in time to hear the laughter, and demanded to hear it all over again. By the time they were all aboard, Sam had told the tale three times.

"Getting us ready for space, he is," he repeated, "all by himself. Got some bee about how we should be top-crack efficient—"

"You think maybe we should line up and get ourselves inspected?" That was Wilbers, the radio-mech. "Can you play bugle calls on your face-organ, Harmony? You better practise up!"

Sam joined in the laugh with the rest, but Mike didn't show, and the joke died. He turned in that night, nursing the uncomfortable feeling that there was something wrong with an Academy cadet who was so scared of his neck that he would squander a small fortune, and work himself to a standstill, just to fix up a lot of stuff that didn't matter two damns anyway. His last conscious thought was a hooe that Old Jackup would be pleased with his smart nephew.

But Captain Upjohn, as he came aboard at noon the following day, was his usual casual self. He greeted his nephew's brisk salute with a perfunctory wave of the hand, and went off, at once, with the first mate, to supervise battening down.

Sam was too busy to study Mike much, and it was not until he went below to watch Chief Engineer McCreedy run up the gyro-gravs that he saw the boy again. Mike had a satisfied look, under his habitual anxiety, but Sam could deduce nothing from that. The "Doughnut" was warm, and humming, gently. McCreedy stood by the manual panel, and threw the lead-switch. Sam had no official business in the power-room, but he liked to be there for this, and although he had seen it a thousand times, it never failed to fascinate him. You had a gyro, weighted to five tons, laid East-West—and it formed part of the flywheel of another gyro lying North-South—and the two of them were within a third gyro, set to spin on a vertical axis. Three gyros, one within the other, all spinning at right angles to each other.

The compound motion, alone, was enough to hypnotise the sight, but, as the power went on, and they came up to speed, the very fabric of the ship began to groan with the strain. The gyros spun and twirled—and Sam hung on to a guard rail as the familiar yet shivery feeling of instability caught at him. He tore his eyes away from the sight, to see Mike, nearby, with a waiting, watchful expression on his face. Curiosity flamed in his mind, but before he could voice it the smooth, surging song of strain faltered.

The booming hum became a stammer—then a chatter—then a monstrous slamming that shook the whole ship into fuzzy-edged indistinctness. Sam clung to the guard-rail, and saw McCreedy's face—a blank of astonishment. Sam screamed at him, and couldn't hear himself, over the clamour. He saw the Chief peering at his instruments—bending close—fumbling with hand-settings—and then—beautifully—the clamour was gone and there was only the smooth, powerful purr.

"What happened?" Sam demanded, weakly, and Mike grinned.

"Sounded as if one of the Gee-Gees was out of phase—but it's all right now. McCreedy was quick, wasn't he? Lucky I fixed that synchroscope, wasn't it?"

"You fixed more than that, you young maniac!" Sam swore, as there came a squawk from the intercom. McCreedy stalked across to answer it, and came back, grinning. He threw the interlock which transferred control to the Main Control Room, topside, and halted by Sam on his way up.

"Old Jackup just handed me a bouquet," he chuckled. "First time anything ever went wrong with the Gee-Gees—and he's pleased we were able to fix it so fast. Reckon that's wiped the Academy's eye, hey?"

Sam tried to return the grin, but the effort was almost negative. Things were adding up in his mind, and the answers were awful.

With fifteen minutes to go, Sam's task, now, was to nip very smartly over the side and pick up the last material communications Junket would have until she made Moonfall. So he nipped smartly, and got back with a minute to spare. He scurried to turn the mail over to the Captain, and hastened back to his own cabin with the fonotape spool he had just received. On the way, he passed Cadet Grant.

"Nothing ever goes wrong, eh, Sam?" he murmured, meaningly, and Sam felt the sweat break out on his fat face. In the privacy of his cabin he listened to the voice of his old shipmate, and what was left of his hair began to stand up straight at what he heard.

"—so that's where the Mug went, is it? Sure, everybody knows of him, here. He's fabulous. Once in a while they get a super-pupil, and they award him a gold star, and a red band. The Mug has four! Red-bands never ship out—so it just about stood this place on its ear when the Mug said he was signing on with a 'C' Class. It's some project he has in mind—to prove a thesis—why tramp-ship crew degenerate into sloppy carelessness. The way I heard it, he reckons it's not the men, but the conditions—and the high-brass didn't like that, at all. You better watch out—whatever he has in mind will be rugged—he's one of the all-or-nothing kind—"

Sam shuddered as his chuckling friend went on. He could feel the ship swaying gently as the handling-party steered it across the expanse of concrete to position it in the middle of the jump-off area. Up to now that swaying had never bothered him. Now he felt it as symbolic of the general uncertainty he felt about the immediate future. He tottered back to the Main Control.

Upjohn stood by his console, nudging the ship into alignment with the Grid-Field. Not once did he spare a glance for the indicator. Sam ached to call out, but his throat was dry. He saw the Old Man nod, to himself, and slap the "Fix" indicator—and the whole ship spun round two seconds of arc, with a whip-snap.

"Who the hell moved my pencil-mark?" Sam heard Upjohn roaring, as he picked himself up. Then there was Mike's gentle voice.

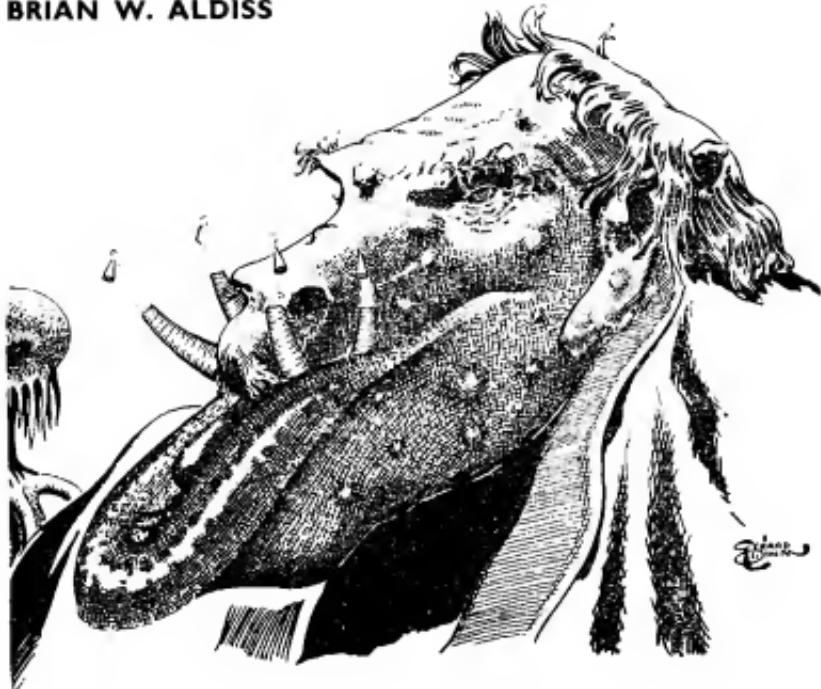
"The indicator's spot-on, Sir—!"

"Blast the indicator—I don't need any damned gadget to tell me when my ship's—Ah! Hmm! So it is—!" Upjohn cooled off, quickly. "All right—five seconds to lift—stations, everybody!" Sam saw him scowl at the instrument, and give it a surreptitious thump with the heel of his hand. Then they were all flat out on their couches, grunting to the succession of surges as the Grid tossed them skyward. Sam, fearfully, could hear the Old Man's voice.

"Smart observation, that, Mr. Grant—but you'll learn—in due course—that a space-man gets to distrust instruments—you fly by the well-known seat of your pants. You'll see—we'll make a space-man of you in jig-time!"

Sam groaned, silently. They might—or they might not—make a space-man out of Michael Upjohn Grant, but he was sure as hell going to make efficient space-men out of them. And—was it imagination—or did the air smell a bit off? This was going to be one helluva trip—!





## Legends of Smith's Burst

*The choice was simple: outwit these crazy beings on this unbelievable world, or remain stranded amongst them for ever*

*Illustrations by Gerard Quinn*

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the most accurate possible text of the adventures of Jamie Lancelot Lowther on the planet Glumpalt. Glumpalt is situated in what is known as the Hybrid Cluster of Smith's Burst, a small intragalactic nebula situated in arm Alpha of the home galaxy.

Like many other traveller's tales, this narrative has frequently

*had its veracity impugned. How true are the strange incidents related in it we shall never know. Only this much is certain: there really was a financier called Lowther living in the Tertiary Galactic Era; there really is a planet called Gumpalt, on which the Black Sun still rises.)*

## I

A man must suffer many moments of indignity in his life, but see to it that you are never put up for sale as I was.

There I was, propped up by two shapeless roughs, having barely recovered consciousness, while below me a crowd yelled prices. I was completely in a daze—or nightmare rather, for the freaks round me could only have issued from a troubled sleep.

To start with the auctioneer, for he had the biggest head of them all. This head was supported some four feet from the ground less by his puny body than by four stalks, which had the power of movement like thin legs. The head itself was fantastically covered with hair, through bald patches of which glittered eyes and orifices. He was at once ludicrous and frightening.

All the crowd gathered round this creature were as ugly or as fantastic. None of them had the decency to own one normal head or one ordinary pair of hands. No two were alike, though many were similar. Each one had something fantastic about him; jaws or claws or maws or paws, eyes or antennae or tails.

Surveying this repellent multitude, I knew I was far from sanity and civilisation and those million worlds which owed allegiance to Earth. I guessed, indeed, I was on one of the benighted planets in Smith's Burst.

If the crowd did not confirm this supposition, my surroundings did. The town, which I shall describe more fully later, was a ramshackle series of fortresses and villages set on little islands, about which lapped a filth-filled lake. The name of this town I soon discovered was Ongustura, although the superstitious people had strange ways with names.

The lake was rimmed round with mountains. Apart from the twisting tracks which scarred them, these mountains were featureless and unwelcoming. Above them loomed the sky. Cloud obscured most of it, but the part that was clear glittered with many points of light. I knew I was somewhere where the stars lay thickly.

All this I took in quickly before being sold.

"Let's have a rope round you, creature, and neither of us will come to harm," my purchaser said to me, leading me from the platform. In my bewilderment, I noticed little, but I thought that he seemed a fairly handsome fellow, until later observation showed that what I thought was his head was his posterior; his face was set in what I would have called his belly.

For all that, it was a joy to hear him speak. This was the first Galingua I had heard since regaining consciousness. All the rest of the parley had been in some local tongue which meant nothing to me.

"Heaven be praised that you are civilised, sir—"

"Silence, you freakish, two-handed, mother's dog!" he growled, interrupting me. "Or I'll have your tongue tied round your wrist."

The confusion in my mind and about me was such that it took me some while to realise that I was in a market square. Among that ugly rabble were many who rode and many who were ridden upon, yet between one and the other there was little to choose. My master—I must call him such—climbed onto a thing like a porpoise; I was dragged up behind him, he jerked the rein, and we were off.

"Mind to right! Mind to the left!" my master called, as we jostled uncomfortably along. Once out of the market, we took a street which sloped down into water. Without hesitation, the porpoise-thing nosed into it and bore us to another island, getting us considerably wetted in the process. Heaving us along another street, it stopped before a tall dirty wooden building.

We dismounted. My master and the porpoise argued violently in the local tongue until the former produced some nickel coins as big as a saucer, which the creature slipped into a pocket in his saddle before moving off. Without more ado, I was led into the building.

Gloom and squalor surrounded us. May I be preserved from describing that or any other structure on that foul globe! Its owner had once built one room, covering it with a sloping roof to fend off the rains. When he needed more space, he built another room nearby, connecting them with a covered way. Over the years he had required more and more rooms as he turned his abode into a lodging house. Since no more space was available for him horizontally, he had been forced to build upwards—in the most casual manner possible, for the cell (it was no more) my master and I ascended to was made of sloping tile underfoot. It had once been

the roof of the second story room below; nobody had seen fit to alter it beyond changing its title from "roof" to "floor."

There we squatted uncomfortably, my master on a pile of rags I avoided for their smell's sake.

"Sleep, you execrable example of protoplasm!" he cried to me, tugging at the rope secured round my neck. "Sleep, for in only two dervs you and I set out for Anthropophagi Land. Rest while you can."

A *derv* was a fifth part of a day, a day being an *awderv* (*aw* meaning five)—but the local day was as uncertain as much else there, and an *awderv* was simply an arbitrary period of about twenty hours.

It seemed sensible to win the confidence of this creature that had me in tow. Were he foolish enough to trust me, my chances of escape would be increased.

"I cannot sleep for looking at you," I said. "How beautiful you are, with those massive pincers at the end of your four arms, and that exquisite fringe of green hair—or is it moss?—down the front of your legs."

"No two are born alike," he said complacently, as if repeating an ancient saying.

"Some are more beautiful than others."

"That talk's punishable as heresy in Ongustura," my master said, lowering his voice. "The law states each fellow is as beautiful as his neighbour."

"Then you demonstrate the stupidity of the law."

By this he was pleased. By such touches I won him round to a better mood. He soon told me what I had suspected from his mastery of Galingua, that he was a traveller, a trader, moving from one part of the globe to another. The globe was called Glumpalt; he knew it to be in the intra-galactic nebula called Smith's Burst on galactic charts; beyond that he was totally ignorant. He had never heard of mattermitters, nor had he ever left this accursed world—nor did he ever wish to.

His name was Thrash Pondo Pons. He was superstitious like all Glumpaltians and as vain as most of them. He looked and smelt bizarre. He had no manners, education, or friends, except such as he acquired by accident—this was representative of his entire heterogeneous race. He had many good points, although these took me longer to discover. He was brave, industrious, resolute, and had

a peculiarly sweet resigned attitude towards the blows of fate, which of course fell as liberally on Glumpalt as elsewhere.

Thrash Pondo Pons was not even remotely human. Yet I got on with him as well as I should have done with a human under similar circumstances.

I did not sleep out the two dervs, nor did he. Towards the end of that time, we rose and made a meal. My first meal on Glumpalt! Realising I was hungry, I set to eat as much as I could from the communal trough set before us. Part of the dish was cooked, part raw, part still alive.

Thrash then got his cart ready. It stood behind the lodging house, a complex structure with iron chassis, the superstructure being wood and canvas. To this, two "horses" were harnessed; one looked something like a caterpillar, one something like an elephant. I was pulled aboard and secured in the back of the cart, and off we started on what was to be a fantastic peregrination.

When we came to water, we embarked onto a sort of barge, which was rowed. It took an hour to get the cart balanced on the barge; we were in constant danger of pitching over into the stinking water. I cursed a people who seemed too stupid to build bridges.

At last we were moving slowly among the islands, often being passed by lighter craft or swimmers. I had time to observe more of Ongustura from the back of the cart. With its crazy buildings, it was most like a series of gigantic little rubbish dumps, debris piled up to make houses, which covered every available bit of land. How many people and things lived there could not be computed—but the place swarmed with multi-formed life.

Imagine then the joy, the great leap my heart took, when I sighted, amid one rubble pile, a great clean snout of polished steel pointing up to the clouds! There stood a space ship, its bulk indicating that it was some kind of star freighter. I cried aloud with relief.

My immediate predicament had not blinded me to the possibility that I might be stranded for ever on this god-forsaken globe. It seemed so primitive that I had not dared to hope it would be on any space ship route.

"Whose is the ship?" I called to Thrash.

"TransBurst Traders," he replied. "I came here to sell them skins and carcasses and haractock. They'll be off for Acrostic in ten awdervs, the day after the Black Sun sets. It'll be rising in about a week now."

Acrostic! That was the name of a planet I knew. It lay towards the edge of Smith's Burst, beyond the Hybrid Cluster in which Glumpalt belonged. Once on Acrostic, it would be comparatively easy to work one's way back to civilisation. I knew now that all my efforts must be bent on escaping from Thrash and getting onto that ship. It was my only hope.

Yet I stayed quiet, for one of Thrash's five eyes was upon me.

## II

We finally reached the merges of that dirty lake. With infinite risk, the cart was trundled ashore and we began to climb one of the twisting tracks that led over the mountains.

A leather halter round my neck, a rope round my waist, I walked beside Thrash as we creaked along.

"Let's hope Chance will be with us once we cross the pass," Thrash muttered. "The country is riddled with demons at this time of year. What's more, we shall enter into the lands of the Ungulph of Quilch, a ruler without mercy to those who come from Ongustura, for he and it are traditional enemies. Fortunately, you should be some protection to me."

"How so?" I asked suspiciously.

"You have the same peculiar outward form—only one head and four main limbs—as the Ungulph's youngest daughter."

On this remark he would not elaborate, growing more surly as we climbed higher. I stared hard at him, and suddenly he grew two shadows.

Startled, I found I had two shadows as well. Looking up, I saw the clouds had partially cleared. A pair of suns shone there, one a monstrous pink thing like a splodge of blancmange, the other a more yellow and brilliant globe. I had been on planets of binary stars before, and always curse the complications they make in the calendar.

With their heat on us, we were sweating by the time we reached the pass. The ground sloped gently away before us. Behind, like a series of grimy sand castles in a pool, lay Ongustura. I could still make out the nose of the TransBurst ship.

Checking to see that I was securely tied, Thrash now released his two steeds from the shafts of the cart. The three of them went into some sort of magical routine to appease the anger of any local

spirits who might be about. They burnt reeking fat, danced, sprinkled powder over themselves, and declared that danger lay ahead.

While this mumbo jumbo went on, I had time to observe what never ceased to interest me. On Glumpalt, no distinction is made, or can be made, between homo, animal, fish, reptile, or insect. There is only one great miscellaneous class, the individuals of which may have at one and the same time some of the characteristics of man, horse, crab, toad and grasshopper. Most individuals could produce by chirps, barks, twitters or twangs one of the many Glumpaltian dialects. The only valid difference between Thrash and his steeds was that they had no sort of manual appendages like hands or claws, whereas he had; they were thus condemned to the life of beasts of burden—but in his conversations with them he ignored this distinction.

They finished their magic. We proceeded.

Few landmarks existed on the way ahead. Steadily we covered the miles. The blancmange sun set behind a wall of cloud, but the day remained fairly bright.

“Tell us your history,” Thrash said. “And make it amusing so that I and my friends may laugh aloud to scare the demons who beset our route.”

So I told him my history. He translated it as I spoke into some Glumpaltian tongue for his friends’ better understanding.

“I am a financier,” I said. “Rather, I am an entrepreneur for a large company of moneylenders who are not recognised by the galactic government. There is a deal of risk in all our transactions, and consequently our rates are high. I myself am frequently involved with the law in trying to save my company from loss.

“Last week, I had pulled off a considerable deal with the rebel government of Rolf III. I had earned a vacation on Earth and planned to travel there by mattermitter—which is the apparatus for transmitting matter between two points, or two planets. Being at some disagreement with the authorities, I arranged to be broadcast back to Earth by an illegal beam.

“Obviously that beam was not powerful enough. Having to pass through a disturbed region of space like Smith’s Burst, it must have been momentarily broken. And in consequence I materialised here!”

They did not laugh. They stopped the cart.

“Magic!” Thrash said. “Beastly magic, you symmetrical super-sausage!”

From then on I was watched more closely than ever. Thrash took to wearing a great bow over his shoulder; a quiver of brass-tipped arrows hung at his side. This did not encourage me to make a sudden run for freedom, for there was little shelter by the roadside. When we stopped at a village, they never let me from their sight even when I fulfilled my natural functions.

Our progress was not rapid. Stopping at villages meant much delay, for an elaborate ritual had to be undergone before we entered the ramshackle walls. This was a ritual to exorcise wayside demons: we had to be purged of their company before those within the village allowed us to enter. The ceremony sometimes took a whole derv, or four hours. I was liberally daubed with a stinking white substance made from powdered shell which Thrash kept in a silver casket.

In the villages, conditions were miasmic. Moreover, I soon lost track of the road back to Ongustura, for there were many trails leading everywhere. To keep track of time was also impossible. Glumpalt evidently had an erratic orbit. Though I heard no more about the Black Sun for a while, the pink and yellow suns rose and sank in a manner to me quite unpredictable.

Perhaps Thrash also had some trouble about the way we were to take through the lands of the Ungulph of Quilch; he was increasingly anxious about the road ahead.

On one occasion, the caterpillar-horse was pulling the cart while Thrash rode on the elephant-horse. I rode behind him. We came to a many-branched tree by the wayside. Raising his claw, Thrash halted us.

"Do you climb up that tree and say if you see anything in the way of landmarks ahead, shoe-shaped one," he ordered, turning to me.

"Unbind my hands and I will," I said.

He untied my wrists.

"Don't try to escape or I spit you through on an arrow," he warned me, tapping his bow.

Going to the tree, I climbed it easily, climbing until I came to the highest branch that would bear me. Then I stared ahead and began calling loudly and anxiously.

"Oh Lord Thrash!" I bellowed. "Come back! Don't ride away from me so fast and leave me in this desolate place! Come back! I swear I am your true servant. I shall be lost without you! Come back!"

In puzzlement and anger, Thrash called out to me from where he stood below.

"Are you out of your senses, monster-man? I am standing still here. I have not moved. Come down at once!"

Taking no notice, I still cried out to him not to ride away and leave me, and so I descended the tree. When I got down and faced him, I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, feigning disbelief.

"But I saw you gallop away on your elephant-horse friend!" I exclaimed bewilderedly. "You disappeared over that hill! That I'll swear."

"Rubbish!" he said. "We have never moved from this spot. Climb up again and deliver truly of what you see ahead."

Obediently I climbed the tree a second time, up to the top branches. A second time I cried out.

"Come back, my master! You gallop away so fast! What have I done to deserve such treatment? Oh, come back, come back! I implore you to return!"

Ignoring his shouts from below, I slid down the trunk and stood before him on the ground.

"I never moved," he said. "What's this foolishness?"

Then I burst into laughter, seizing one of his claws to show my relief.

"There's a glorious illusion, Lord Thrash. You stayed here, yet from the top of this tree I had a perfect picture of you galloping off at full speed over that nearest hill. How wonderfully comic! I beg you to climb up, climb up and see if you can't see something similar. This is a magic tree, set here for the edification of travellers by benevolent spirits. Climb up and laugh your fill!"

The face on his belly broke into a reluctant smile. Obediently he began to climb the tree. Once he was well in the tree, I jumped onto his elephant-horse.

"I am a great enchanter," I snarled into the thing's ear. "Gallop your hardest for the nearest hill or I turn you into a flaming faggot on the instant."

He set off with a start that nearly threw me and went as if pursued by devils. Turning, I saw Thrash Pondo Pons in the top of the tree. He was pointing at me.

"This is in truth a magic tree!" he roared. "I swear it looks as if you are galloping off for the nearest hill on my steed. The illusion is complete! Wonderful! Marvellous!"

He shook with laughter, and the tree shook with him. Next moment we were over the brow of the hill.

## III

I had got away, but was by no means out of my predicament. In which direction lay Ongustura I knew not—and I had only a hostile steed to take me there. All the food I had would not nourish a cockroach; of the local language I could pronounce only the few simple words, mostly obscenities, that I had picked up from Thrash on the journey. And, as if all this were not enough, both the suns were obviously determined to set at once.

My problems were soon complicated further. The elephant-horse had put on that burst of speed one might expect from a creature ridden by a great enchanter. He jolted me abominably, but I did not protest in case Thrash was in pursuit of us. Suddenly, however, I was flung from the saddle by an extra fierce jolt. Alas, I have never been a horseman.

Landing heavily in the short grass, I rolled over and sat up in time to see my curious charger running madly away from me. His broad back and flanks had been loaded with paraphernalia; the jolt which had dislodged me had also shaken loose a casket of worked silver. I looked at it without affection, for it represented my only possession. On opening it, however, I found it was half filled with the nauseous crushed-shell powder, which might be reckoned worth having, since without it it seemed impossible to enter any village.

An evening wind blew chill. I stood up. At once I was aware of a curious sensation. One of my legs was lighter than the other. The ground here was slightly broken, as if by a minor earth fault. Walking to and fro, I discovered that my whole body felt lighter when over this fault line. No doubt this unaccountable shift in weight was responsible for my fall.

Dusk was coming on. Unable to solve the mystery, I took the casket under my arm and stepped briskly forward. After only five minutes' walk, to my great pleasure, I saw a light ahead. Proceeding more cautiously, I came to a small hamlet inside a wooden compound.

Now was the time to call to those within that a stranger sought shelter, and to begin the absurd magical ritual which would render me fit to go in. But the place was oddly silent. I was cold, in no mood to loiter about. The pink sun had already been swallowed by the dark hills. Boldly, I pushed through the wooden gate and entered the compound.

The dwellings were the usual motley collection, some partly formed by stones or boulders, but most of wood or mud. In the gloom, they huddled about me like so many old cows under blankets. The light I had seen from a distance came from a sort of beacon set in the middle of a "street" to furnish illumination for the hovels nearby.

Nobody stirred. Taking my courage into my hands, for it was growing too cold to be cowardly outdoors, I entered the dwelling into which most light was cast. A fuggy atmosphere clogged my throat. Huddled in the room were several Glumpaltians in their usual variety of shapes and sizes. They crouched motionless under rugs or skins, some snoring gently. Nor did they stir when the smell of the place made me cough violently.

Recovering myself, I went into a rear room to seek for food. There I found a barrel containing something very like salted water snails. I was debating with my stomach whether I could ever bring myself to eat them when there came the sound of footsteps in the street. Shrinking into one corner, I saw a fellow enter the house by the door I had used. I say "fellow," but he was in truth more like a crab, having his eyes on stalks, and several legs to walk on.

Without hesitation he came through to where I hid, seized the barrel of snails and some pots which I guessed to contain other food, and tucked them into some of the pockets of his mighty coat. It was vexing to see burgled what I had been about to steal, yet I made no outcry. If this fellow was one of society's outcasts, I reasoned that he might be of more use to me than the others; and if he was off to a safe refuge with plenty of food, then I could not do better than follow him.

This I did. It was easy. The crabman went from hovel to hovel with no care for silence, adding to his load at each stop. Frost crunched beneath his feet. Desperate with cold, I snatched a thick skin off one of the sleepers; he did not stir. Probably he was hibernating.

Completing his rounds, the crabman left the hamlet and set off across country at a good pace. I followed, but discreetly, for those eyeballs set high on stalks seemed to look everywhere. The risk of discovery was greater now; a bright moon had risen and was racing across the sky, flooding the country with radiance.

We went down a slope into a little valley, then climbed again. Round a sharp cliff, an extraordinary sight greeted me. A rainbow curtain hung across the path, reaching from the ground to about ten feet high. I was in time to see the crabman scurry through it.

The rainbow was mainly violet, red and blue, the colours subdued but perfectly clear. As I approached, the feeling of lightness again assailed me. It became more and more difficult to plant my feet on the ground or to move forward. I did so, growing increasingly weightless.

Now I could see that the rainbow sprang from a precipice about ten feet wide. Normally I would not have been rash enough to attempt jumping it; as it was, weighing so little, I took a good run and cleared it easily. Landing gently, I was in time to see the crabman vanish into a little house carved in the rock.

"Stay and have a word with me!" I cried in Galingua. I did not expect him to understand; I merely wanted his reactions to me, since I had no idea whether he would attack me or run away. In case he did the former I had a stout stick ready, reckoning I could tip him into the precipice with it if it came to a tussle.

"I have words for everyone," he replied. My surprise was complete. It was incredible to believe that this mis-shapen crab could speak the galaxy's most intricate tongue. Forgetting my caution, I went to his door, through which a light shone.

"Where did you learn Galingua?" I asked.

He was rummaging about in an antiquated cupboard, and answered without looking at me, as far as I could see.

"I am an Interpreter. I speak all languages. There is not a tongue talked on Glumpalt I do not know."

If this were true, I had indeed followed the right fellow.

"We could be useful to each other," I said.

"I am useful to no one, unless they can teach me a new language," he said. Now he turned to survey me. He was massive, but his shell seemed fragile enough. When he motioned me in, I mustered as much confidence as possible and closed the door behind me.

"How many languages are there on Glumpalt?" I asked him.

"Two thousand and thirty two, and I speak them all."

"Wrong! There are two thousand and thirty three!" And I began to address him in English. He was amazed. Finally he said, "We will eat and discuss this. Come, sit down, Flat-eyes, we are friends."

We sat on either side of a big upturned tub, on the top of which he piled edibles. The more he talked, the madder I took him to be, particularly as he several times interrupted his talk to circle the

table and me in a meaningless fashion. His history was odd enough. He had a freak brain; he could learn a whole new language in a week, and learning languages was about all he could do. On Clumpalt there were many languages, each little province speaking a different one. So he had been taken on as interpreter at the court of the Ungulph of Quilch.

Eventually he had fallen out with the Ungulph, who had stolen his name and sent him packing. Now he lived a hermit's life without a name, known only as the Interpreter.

At the end of this farrago of facts, when I had eaten as much of the beastly food as I could, I rose.

I was trapped! Sticky ropes bound me. When I seized and pulled them, they adhered to my hand. I could not break them, though they were no thicker than wool thread.

"You are my prisoner," he said. "Sit down again. You will remain here for a week, teaching me this dialect you call English. Then I will let you free again."

From what he then said, I gathered that he was less crab than spider. The ropes had been spun from his own entrails. I saw now that when he circled the table he had been secretly imprisoning me. I struggled to get away. He watched without moving until I fell back exhausted.

Still I did not despair. The thought of the TransBurst Traders' ship lent me ingenuity.

"We are within seven awdervs of Ongustura," I said. "I will happily teach you English if you will take me there."

"I will learn here in comfort."

"I cannot teach you here. Your name is taken from you. I have had all my prepositions taken from me. I was on my way to collect them from a magician in Ongustura. If you will take me there, I will teach you everything but the prepositions on the journey, and those you shall willingly have when we arrive."

"Who is this magician?" he asked suspiciously.

"His name is Bywithanfrom."

"Hm. I will think of it."

So saying, he hauled himself up by a self-made thread to the ceiling and dropped into a coma. Despite my discomfort, I eventually fell asleep over the tub.

## IV

When I woke, a pallid morning had come.

The Interpreter was up and about. He had released me from my bonds, leaving only one long rope round my waist.

"We start soon," he said. "I accept what you suggest. We shall go to Ongustura, there to collect your prepositions and complete my mastery of English."

While he was preparing, I ventured outside. The rope round my middle allowed me as far as the precipice. The rainbow had faded, and I saw that the gulf itself was no more than a deep and broken natural ditch. Again a feeling of lightness overcame me.

Floating rather than jumping, I launched myself into the ditch. The bottom, muddy and full of stones, seemed to offer no explanation for the odd sensation of weightlessness it gave off. Prodding with a sharp stone, however, I dug into something solid. When I pulled at this, a fragment broke off. Grasping it, I saw it looked like natural chalk.

Foolishly, I dropped it. At once it soared up into the air and headed towards the clouds, moving fast.

Beside myself with excitement, I groped for more, filling my pockets with the crumbling stuff. Soon I was so light that I would have taken off myself had I not filled other pockets with ordinary heavy stones.

I ran back into the tawdry hut, in my enthusiasm treating the Interpreter as if he were human. Releasing a chunk of the light stuff, I showed him how it shot up to the ceiling.

"It's anti-gravity material, occurring naturally," I exclaimed. "You have a fortune at your doorstep, don't you realise?"

He shook his eyestalks at me in a dreadful way.

"This material occurs all over Glumpalt in small seams," he said. "But it is not touched because it is bad music. You will die if you persist in keeping it."

Nevertheless, I did persist. When we set out on our journey to Ongustura, my pockets were loaded with the stuff. Only a sack full of ordinary stones on my back enabled me to walk in the usual way.

Thinking back over that trek, I am inclined now to laugh, for we can make as merry over our own past hardships as over our acquaintances' present ones. It was a mad journey! The way lay along stony tracks and barren hills; we slithered over shingle and

mud; we forever slipped down or climbed up the sides of ravines. Better equipped physically than I was, the Interpreter on his eight legs had an easy journey. I was often dropping with fatigue.

Yet one or other of us was talking all the time. The Interpreter seemed to imbibe his languages by a gestalt principle obscure to me; all I had to do was chatter of this and that in English and slowly he took it in. I cannot say how vexing it is, while ascending a slope of one in three, to have to discourse on, say, the origins of the galactic federation, remembering at the same time to omit all prepositions from one's sentences. My own cleverness had imposed a sore task on me.

"You interest me, and I am comprehending a little; are you speaking now of forming committees or informing committees?" the creature would ask, interrupting with a maddening persistence.

And yet, after his own fashion, he was no bad companion. Often, something I said would touch off a train of thought which he might pursue vocally for hours. He particularly favoured an abstruse brand of metaphysics which was incomprehensible to me, but some of his deviations into sense were invaluable. When on the subject of the creation of Glumpalt he told me many things I had wanted to know.

"The nebula you call Smith's Burst," he said, "was formed by the collision of two clouds of cosmic gas, one contra-terrene, one terrene. This little planet condensed out of the resultant mixture. What you call anti-grav material, that chalky stuff, is actually decayed CT matter which, when freed from its surroundings, is violently repelled by the predominant terrene material around it."

"So!" I said thoughtfully. "Now you offer me a scientific explanation for what you previously called magic."

"Magic covers the entire cosmic system of functions," he replied. "Science covers only the small patch of that system we can rationalise." And once more he dived into a bottomless pool of metaphysics. Later, however, he surfaced again to tell me how the strange composition of Glumpalt had affected the life developing upon it. The customary sub-divisions of animal life had never occurred. Contra-terrene genes made it quite possible for a fishman to produce birdman progeny. Uncertainties of day and climate did nothing to regularise matters.

This mention of birdmen was the first I had heard of them. Yet only a derv later I saw one with my own eyes. It had begun to snow with a sort of tranquil determination that took the heart out of me. I looked hopelessly up at the thick sky.

Poised only a few feet above me was a skinny thing with slowly flapping wings. I saw the wings were of skin, mottled now with gooseflesh and dangling raw pink figures at their outer edges. The eyes of this creature, like holes scooped in mud, were fixed upon me.

In horror, I seized up a stone and flung it. The flying creature, rattling those obscene pinions, swerved higher through the falling snow.

I hardly saw what the Interpreter did. Tilting up his rump, he shot from it a great line of that sticky strand I knew so well. It sailed up and curled about the flying thing's ankle. Of all that I saw wonderful on Glumpalt, this incident stands out most vividly in my mind. The birdman, jerked by his foot, lost his equilibrium, toppling backwards with hoarse cries.

As a flier, no terrestrial bird is half as clumsy as he was. Yet this poor creature saved himself a severe fall and stood a moment later a few yards from us in the snow, shivering. When we approached, he clucked for mercy in a bizarre tongue.

Apart from a helmet strapped on his skull, he was naked. An untidy fur covered his body from the waist down. He was pigeon-chested. His face resembled a mole's, bristles sticking from his snout. All his skin, including those disgusting wings which hung down from his shoulders like two empty scrotums, was blue or yellow. I thought he looked near to death with cold and fright.

The Interpreter questioned him ferociously in the clucking tongue. He knocked the pathetic creature over into the snow before swivelling an eyeball at me.

"This is bad, friend biped," he said. "The Ungulph of Quilch is now engaged in another season of looting. If he finds me, my gravestone will be the crust of a court pie. His men are hereabouts —this creature is one of them, I knew by the helmet. He says the Ungulph is on the march. So we must take to the nearest village and hide."

From what I had heard from Thrash Pondo Pons of the Ungulph, I knew he would be unpleasant. So I pressed on eagerly with the Interpreter, the birdman dragging along behind us, still tethered by his ankle and uttering chirps of woe.

The village we arrived at was the most disgusting I had come on. Its inhabitants took their dominant characteristic from the rabbit; they had long ears and lived underground. Faint with cold and fatigue as I was, my need for shelter was so great I did not protest. We underwent the usual purification rights; fortunately I still had with me the silver casket containing purification powder which had

been Thrash's. When we had performed the senseless ritual in the snow, we were allowed to go with stooped shoulders down a passage into the earth.

On either side of our way ran tunnels, some only cul-de-sacs and filled with squalling families.

"This place stinks!" I gasped. Underfoot was like a midden.

"It is warm," replied the Interpreter. I wondered if a sense of smell existed on this benighted planet.

The tunnel we were in seemed to be a sort of main road. It ended in a broad cavern through which ran a fast river. Along this river a sort of waterfront had grown up, with shacks and hovels hanging onto the very edge of the water. To one of these we were led by a rabbitman the Interpreter had accosted.

We were shown a foul-smelling cupboard I must call a room. Here the rabbitman left us, bowing and taking the birdman with him. The latter flapped his wings feebly, chirping in useless protest as he was dragged away.

"What is happening to the birdman?" I enquired, when we were alone.

"I have sold him for our night's board," said the Interpreter calmly. "Proceed with my English lesson. We were on the subject of religions, but you will have to explain to me again what the Assumption was."

So I talked. I had talked so much that talking became a nightmare; I no longer seemed to comprehend the sounds emerging from my own mouth. In particular, it was horrible to talk to the Interpreter. I pictured my English words being imprisoned by that incredible brain within which two thousand other languages already lay captive. I pictured them lined up like little bottles gathering dust in a deserted attic.

At last we were called to go and feed. We descended to a room full of long-eared and variegated creatures, all of whom mercifully paid less attention to us than to the meal. This meal, I must admit, tasted better than anything I had so far eaten. It was a yellowy stew, bony and greasy perhaps, but with a savour even a less ravenous man could have relished.

"Excellent!" I said at last to my companion. "I am grateful to you for so excellent a feed."

"Direct your gratitude to the birdman. He has provided."

"I don't see what you mean."

"Only the wings are not edible. And they can be tanned and will make someone an excellent cloak."

## V

To overcome my nausea, I forced the Interpreter to take me outside. He was sluggish, but we walked up and down. Several local inhabitants were listening to one fellow with long ears and whiskers who stood on a stool to address them. His gestures were violent and excited, although the crowd round him was unmoved. I asked the Interpreter what was happening.

"The talkative fellow is a politician. He says that if everyone supports him, he will abolish short ears from the warren for ever. He says that when he is in power people will be able to relieve themselves where they wish. He says that under him, nobody's arteries will harden."

"How can they believe anything so preposterous?"

"He will sprinkle a magical chemical in the drinking water."

My companion, who was now yawning furiously, dragged me back to our cupboard. All round, everyone else was going home. Little lights were winking out. Doors were closing. The whole underground town was preparing for hibernation.

For some while I slept. Waking with a headache, I lay motionless. A red light filtered through our window, making me believe that I was back on Earth with the fire burning in my bedroom. A noise like a pistol shot roused me. Alarmed, I sat up.

The Interpreter lay close by me. The great shell covering most of his body had split clean across. This was the noise I had heard. As I looked, peering through the red glow, I saw the shell gape wider and wider open. Very frightened now, I called to him; he did not move. I shook one of his bristly legs; he did not answer.

Now the two edges of shell were wide apart and still slowly opening. In my panic I became belatedly aware of a growing chorus of shrieks outside. For the first time it occurred to me to wonder what the red glow outside was.

Thrusting my head out of the window, I saw an alarming spectacle. Sailing down the river came a number of fire rafts, loaded high with burning cinders and wood. From them came the red glow which lit up the cavern. Some of them sailed harmlessly by on the current, but others had drifted to the edge of the river where they had already set fire to the houses jostling there. The babble of screaming increased as the unfortunate occupants poured out.

Again I turned to the Interpreter. Here on the waterfront we were in danger. Yet, shaking did not rouse him. His carapace now

fell off with a clatter. Beneath it I saw a new and soft shell, and realised he was shedding the old one, probably going into a trance while so doing.

"Here is your chance to escape!" I told myself. Seizing the sticky rope which secured me, I cut it easily on the sharp edge of the old carapace. But how would it profit me to run away, when this poor old bag of crab flesh was taking me to Ongustura and the TransBurst Traders' rocket as swiftly as possible? Alone I should be quite at a loss.

Smoke billowed in through the window.

Glancing out, I saw a fire raft had jammed against the river bank only a few yards away, setting light to the next house. Flame and smoke had made of the cavern a monstrous place. Without hesitation, I took hold of my entranced companion by two legs and, slinging him over my shoulder, hurried from the house.

A mob seethed round the waterfront, dashing that way and this in their alarm. Some threw themselves into the river; I was unable in the uncertain light to see whether they swam or drowned. Through the din of their voices one oft-repeated word came to me: "Ungulph!"

Now the Ungulph's soldiers appeared. They had chosen this poor village for one of their raids. After the fire rafts, rafts loaded with warriors drifted down the underground river. As they were poled to the shore, their occupants waved swords or banged drums. The rabbit people fled shrieking before them. Inevitably, I followed.

The tunnels were full of people, all rushing to escape above ground. It was terribly dark. One could do nothing but press forward and hope blindly to be ejected into the night. I had the Interpreter on my back and panic in my heart. At last the darkness seemed to thin. The crowds miraculously fell away ahead. Next moment I was out into the open.

At once, a crushing blow caught me over the shoulders. I fell to my knees. Looking up under the carapace I bore, I saw silhouetted against the night sky two giant soldiers belonging to the Ungulph. Posted at the entrance to the warren-village, they each bore a mighty axe with which they cleft in two all who emerged into the open. I had escaped death only because the Interpreter lay over me and had taken the blow. To my horror I found he was almost in half; his new soft shell had done nothing to protect him.

No time for meditation was allowed me. I was grabbed and flung to one side, onto a great pile of bodies which were being systematic-

ally searched for valuables. Beyond the pile, sitting in an open tent, was a swinish fellow in robes. He sat gazing at such trinkets as were laid before him.

I had no doubt this was the Ungulph of Quilch. His four tusks were capped with gold, and from them hung four little bells which tinkled when he turned his great head. Bristles covered his face. His lower jaw was an immense scoop; he looked to have a yard of under-lip. From where I lay, he seemed immense. Long dark robes covering his body completed the picture of something that might have played Demon King in a pantomime.

Behind him, in the tent, stood a slighter figure. It was human! It was, indeed, a beautiful girl with dark, short-cropped hair. If this was the Ungulph's daughter, I had heard of her; Thrash had spoken of her.

Foolishly, I was making no attempt to escape. I lay where I was, shocked as much as anything to think of the Interpreter's death. When my wits properly returned, the realisation came that dawn was rapidly breaking. The sky along one stretch of the horizon grew suddenly pale; in a minute a blazing white sun appeared.

"Run for it!" I cried to myself.

Jumping up, I plunged down the mound of bodies. I ran past the Ungulph's tent and towards open country as fast as I could go. The Ungulph's men instantly gave chase. Several birdmen took off and flew after me.

Yet I would have escaped but for the abyss!

I pulled up on its very edge. The lip of it was concealed by knee-high grass. There I stood, shuddering, for I had almost plunged in. Before me, only a pace ahead, was a great gorge fully a quarter mile deep, its sides so sheer as to be unclimbable. I turned, but my pursuers, a whole pack of them, were upon me. Next moment I was hauled struggling before the Ungulph, who came striding up to inspect me, his bells jingling.

Knowing it to be useless to ask such a swine for mercy, I took the opposite tack.

"So, Ungulph, you come before me to ask for mercy at last!" I cried in Galingua, though my voice shook. "I hoped to lead all your men into falling into this great abyss of mine, but I repented at the last moment. Let me go free or I will cause my abyss to open still further and swallow you all."

The Ungulph's savage face regarded me. Then he turned round and bellowed so that his four bells shook. Everyone was silent until

his daughter timidly answered him. He barked at her, she replied, he barked again, and then she turned to me.

"My father, the Ungulph, does not speak Galingua; he asks you to speak in the local court tongue."

"I am the great magician Bywithanfrom," I declared. "I speak in what language I prefer. Who but you here speaks Galingua?"

"Only I, sir."

"What is your name, fair one?"

"I am dark, sir, and my name is Chebarbar."

"Tell your father my abyss will devour him unless he lets me go."

When this was translated, the Ungulph gave a bellow of rage. I saw momentarily that he had four hooves and that they pawed the ground. Then he rushed forward and seized me by the waist. He was villainously strong. For a second I hung upside down—then he flung me forward with all his might into the abyss.

A man dying sees and knows many things. Among all the terrible details that stood out in my mind, one in particular was clear. As I plunged head down to death, some stones passed me. I saw them go by without understanding.

Almost immediately, my descent slowed. Puzzled, shaken, half-believing myself mad, I began to float up again. The anti-grav material and the ballast to counteract it had lain forgotten in my pockets; the Ungulph's hurling me upside down had caused some of the ballast to fall free, thus saving my life. Buoyed by the anti-grav material, I rose up again, righting myself as I went.

My head appeared over the lip of the drop. A terrible groan came from the ragged crowd. As one man, they fell to the ground, the Ungulph and Chebarbar with them, grovelling with superstitious awe. This gave me the chance to scramble to safety and weigh down my pockets with fresh stones. Then I called to Chebarbar.

I helped her to her feet and ordered her father to stand.

"Tell your father, the Ungulph," I said, "that despite his wickedness I bear him no malice, for he can do me no harm. If he will provide me with a steed I will ride quietly away."

She repeated this in her own tongue. I was as nervous as a ghost. Still I had to get clear away, and find a guide and interpreter to lead me to Ongustura. While I worried, the Ungulph was uttering grunts.

"My father, the Ungulph, says he regrets trying to harm so great a magician. He will furnish you with a steed, the best he can find. He also says he will do anything you request for the benefit of your great magic. He needs protection from his enemies."

"He is a wise man," I said. Meanwhile, I thought rapidly. Chebarbar was hardly as pretty as I had believed at first. She had a snub nose, freckles, and uneven teeth—but of course I was fortunate that she had a normal face at all. At least she seemed intelligent and not too disagreeable. I spoke again, producing from my pack the silver powder casket I had taken from Thrash and holding it above my head.

"Tell your father, the Ungulph, that this casket is powerful magic. The thing it contains is what the most contented man on Glumpalt needs. It is something mightier than the whole universe. It is what will save the Ungulph even if faced with inevitable death. Tell him that he may have this casket and what it contains if I may have you, Chebarbar, in exchange."

I thought her voice faltered as she translated this.

There were now gathered here a jostling multitude of half-men, all the varied shapes and sizes which made up the Ungulph's legions. I hated them, if only for the cruel way they had destroyed the warren-village. The sight of them made me more determined than ever to get to Ongustura as quickly as possible.

Chebarbar turned back and addressed me. She was very pale.

"My father, the Ungulph, says that since I am only a woman I am of little value to him. He will happily exchange me for the magic casket if it really holds what you say."

"It contains just what I say. Tell him to open it only in emergency."

Already a steed was being brought forward. It was striped like a tiger, though it had the horn of a rhinoceros and six legs. By its looks it was fleet enough. A crude ladder was set at its flank. I mounted, pulling Chebarbar up after me and setting her before me. We seemed alarmingly far above the ground.

When I whacked the creature's behind with a sort of paddle affixed to the saddle for that purpose, it burst immediately into a gallop—much to my relief. The soldiery fell back to let it through. Whacking it again, I coaxed a more rapid pace yet. Bearing away from the abyss, we headed for a track leading towards wooded country. All the time, I kept glancing back to see if we were pursued.

"Why do you look back so often?" Chebarbar protested. "My father, the Ungulph, will not follow unless you tricked him."

"I am afraid he may open the casket."

"Why should he not?"

"It is entirely empty, Chebarbar."

"Then what does it contain that the most contented man on Glumpalt needs?"

"A contented man needs nothing."

"What is in it mightier than the universe?"

"Nothing is mightier than the universe."

"What is in it that will save my father from inevitable death?"

"Nothing can save a man from inevitable death. And that is what the casket contains—nothing!"

I saw her shoulders were heaving. For an instant I regretted that my childish trick had been played on her father. Then I realised she was not crying, but laughing. It was the first pleasing laughter I had heard since my appearance in Smith's Burst.

Only when we had put several leagues between us and the Ungulph did I dare let the tiger-rhino rest. We stopped by a brook among a clump of trees and climbed down.

"I must drink," I said, stopping to do so. One of the trees lifted its root from the brook and squirted me with a jet of water. Chebarbar laughed again, this time delighting me less with her noise. She explained after a while that these trees were in fact semi-sentient, and capable of moving at will along a moisture supply. They had used a typical way of defending that supply.

Disgruntled, I moved on to a free section of the brook; there we drank and held a sort of council of war. We had no food; my time was running out anyhow, making it imperative to reach Ongustura without further delay. Chebarbar told me she thought we could be no more than three days' march from that city—but to my disappointment confessed she did not know the way there. Her father had an old rivalry with the place, never visiting it except to attack its outskirts.

Until now, I had borne my misfortunes with some courage, but this unexpected setback just when success was almost within my reach, flung me into great depression. I buried my face in my hands and groaned. To my surprise, Chebarbar put an arm round my shoulders.

"Don't be unhappy," she said. "I cannot bear to see a brave man despair. I think I have something which may comfort you."

Releasing me, she began to untie the cord that confined her breast to her tunic.

"This is most womanly—" I began in gratitude, but she was merely fishing out a small dagger-shaped talisman which hung by

a chain round her neck. Relacing herself, she dangled the bauble before me.

"With this we can summon Squexie Oxin. It will surely help us when it sees this talisman."

I asked the obvious question and she told me that her father, the Ungulph, had long ago saved the Squexie Oxin from death at the hands of an enemy potentate. Recognising the Squexie as a useful ally, he had given it a castle in his lands; there it lived in almost complete isolation, although it would come forth to aid the Ungulph when summoned by talisman.

"Squexie Castle is only a short way from here," Chebarbar explained. "I will take you there, and then the Squexie will take us to Ongustura, protecting us all the way."

When I said this was ideal, and jumped up ready to be moving, the Ungulph's daughter added, "There are but two hindrances to the plan. In the first place, the Squexie must not discover who I am or it would undoubtedly deliver me forcibly back to my father. But it is hardly likely to find out, since it has never seen me."

"And the other snag?"

"The Squexie only becomes available when the Black Sun rises. Fortunately, by the look of the sky, that will not be long now."

I squinted upward. The dazzling white sun had already passed its zenith, though I judged it some hours from setting. The yellow sun and the pink blancmange one had also risen again without my knowing. Between them, the three suns had driven every cloud from the sky; it was uncomfortably hot. I could see the nearby tree-things ambling along the brook, squirting water over themselves.

Recalling what Thrash Pondo Pons had said about the TransBurst ship blasting off the day after the Black Sun set, I asked Chebarbar, "How long will the Black Sun remain above the horizon? We have to be in Ongustura when it sets, or very shortly after."

"It depends," she said. "The Black Sun's orbits are so irregular that even my father's astronomers cannot compute them. Unfortunately it is controlled by a magician in a far country."

"Tell your father's astronomers to buy themselves a telescope," I growled, climbing up into the saddle.

Chebarbar snuggled up in front of me and we were off, the girl pointing out the way. I kept one arm round her waist, so that she would not slip. The landscape became almost pretty. We passed through great plantations of holly—only the profuse crop of berries it bore consisted of bright orange fruit the size of oranges. Indeed, they tasted much like oranges, except for an unpleasant tang about

them which Chebarbar said was neon, an inert gas trapped from the air by the plants' sharp leaves.

While we ate, we heard people approaching. Entering painfully into the holly thicket, we persuaded our steed to lie, and lay down beside him ourselves. Some of the Ungulph's men appeared; Chebarbar whispered to me that from what they were saying she knew they searched for her. She was afraid, and clung tightly to me. (*Here there is a break in the narrative.—Ed.*).

At last we picked ourselves up and went on.

Beyond the plantation, the ground rose slightly. Mounting the incline, we found at the top the lip of a shallow crater which extended so far that it must have been half a mile in diameter.

I gazed at it in awe, for it was a dreary but impressive sight. An island stood in the middle of the crater, and on this island stood a castle built, as it seemed, of a random pile of flaking slate. It had no regular shape, no windows, no towers. Its plane surfaces glittered dull as death. To look at it was to suffer some terrible foreknowledge of the creature that dwelt there.

"That is the castle of the Squexie Oxin," Chebarbar said unnecessarily, clinging to my arm.

"What manner of creature is this Squexie?"

"Unique."

No way of getting to the ghastly castle existed. The island on which it stood was surrounded with a sort of oily water filling the crater to its lip. There was no bridge across.

Everything about us was absolutely still, the holly plantation behind, the great bright landscape ahead. It might all have been a weird, meaningless painting, quite without life, but for the waters of the crater. They bubbled and moved in a peculiar way, like a mindless creature heaving in its sleep. In one place in particular, a line stretching from rim to island, the liquid heaved and tumbled. For all its agitation, it produced no bubbles or foam.

Diving in and out of this stuff, flying, then diving again, were strange birds like plucked pelicans. From the eminence on which we stood, we heard their desolate cries.

Even Chebarbar, I think, was abashed at this scene. We stood there in a kind of trance—and so were easily surrounded by the Ungulph's men, who burst from the holly bushes at us. Ten of them, miscellaneous-shaped brutes, stood there, waving tentacles, claws, or swords at us. This time I knew I should need more than cunning to save us both from death.

I was seized before I could move. My hands were roughly pulled behind my back by a sort of ox-headed insect who stank of fish. Chebarbar was also seized, and a rough paw clapped across her mouth to stop her screams.

Yet the screams went on. The creature who held me drew a great sword and pointed it at my chest. Then he too, as the others were doing, paused to see who screamed. It was one of the Ungulph's men. His shaking claw went to the far horizon beyond the Squexie's castle. We all stared.

Into the bright sky there, a great fan of blackness grew. At its edge it was a pallid grey, in the centre it was as dark as midnight in midwinter. Though the three suns still burned in the sky, they had no effect on that segment of night.

The impression produced by this sight on the Ungulph's men was immediate. They let go of us and turned to run for shelter in the plantation. Chebarbar and I were miraculously free again.

"The Black Sun's rising!" Chebarbar cried. She too would have run away in panic had I not grasped her wrist and held her.

"Now we can call on the Squexie," I said.

In their haste to get away, the soldiers had dropped a number of belongings, a sword, a sort of pike, a bundle of disgusting food, a primitive lantern, and a cloak of skins. Picking up the cloak, I put it round Chebarbar, who shivered though it was still hot.

I thrust the sword through my belt, hung the lantern over my shoulder, and kicked the food away. The pike was useless.

The birds in the crater had fallen silent. All was quiet everywhere. That great black fan was spilling over the horizon into the sky.

A curious detail caught my eye. Over the crater's oily contents, a thick mist was forming. Colour whirled in it, so that I was reminded of the rainbow curtain that stood before the Interpreter's house; this made me think that if there were anti-grav material here in the crater, it would probably cause that curious disturbance of the waters. Proof of this theory seemed to be that the mist was especially dense over the most turbulent strip of water. As the sky grew darker, so the mist became thicker and brighter.

Now more than half the sky turned ashy grey or else completely black. The three suns still shone: but their power had left them. They seemed as useless as balloons against the encroaching dark.

Then the Black Sun rose over the horizon!

Just for a moment I saw it clear by the light of the other suns. It was a great sooty ball, crammed with darkness, radiating black-

ness. A chilly wind swept the land. Everything at once turned to night. Though the other three suns still burned in the sky, even they disappeared. All was jet black.

Never tell me you have seen a fearful sight until you have stood on Glumpalt and watched the Black Sun rise!

It absorbs all light like blotting paper, and an intense cold prevails. Of course, the explanation of this unique phenomenon soon occurred to me. Bearing in mind the mixed origins of Smith's Burst, it became obvious that this monstrous, impossible sun was merely a ball of original and undiluted contra-terrene matter—and of such strength that even its visible emissions were of reverse polarity.

The darkness which embraced us was complete. Shivering, I pulled the primitive lantern from my shoulder and attempted to light it.

By my side, Chebarbar whimpered in fright.

"Something touched me!" she said.

As she spoke a thing that I at once took to be a wet muzzle pressed against my cheek.

## VII

In this brief narrative, I have been mainly content to let events speak for themselves. I have related simply what happened, leaving the reader to fill in for himself what my emotions were at the time. So here, at this moment of supreme terror, when all the elemental horrors in being seemed to crowd in upon me, I will just say without elaboration that I screamed like a wounded horse. More cold muzzles nudged my flesh, and only after several seconds did I realise that they were nothing but large snowflakes. Curtailing my screams, I lit my lantern.

It gave forth no light. Only the undoubted fact that I burned my finger on it assured me that it really was functioning. The contra-terrene radiations of the Black Sun had blanketed it out entirely. Though I held it before my eyes until my eyebrows singed I could see nothing.

Yet, a light was visible ahead of us.

Seizing Chebarbar's hand and the bridle of the tiger-rhino, I ventured cautiously to the lip of that dark crater.

The thick rainbow-coloured mist which spanned the water had frozen solid. Glowing with many hues, it illumined its own way

over the waters. No doubt a certain CT content explained its luminosity.

"Now there is a way to Squexie Oxin," Cherbarbar murmured. "I told you it was available only when the Black Sun rose. Come, I am not afraid."

For myself, I could not say as much. At any time I would have been loath to visit that frowning castle; at this forbidding midnight, doubly so. Moreover, I hated to trust myself to that fragile-seeming bridge. As soon as we stepped onto it, it groaned in protest.

Leaving our steed on the bank with instructions to stay there, we ventured forward. Once we were onto the bridge, it was steady enough, being of the consistency of firm snow. We sank up to our ankles in it but no more.

Thus we came to the island, and to the castle of the Squexie. As we reached it, a slab of it fell outwards. A piping voice uttered words which Cherbarbar translated to me as "welcome." We passed in, Cherbarbar swinging her talisman. It was good to get out of the snow storm; more than that I could not say.

Inside, to my great relief, a fire burnt, giving forth warmth and light. The flames came from a sort of trough, beneath which a pipe ran down through the floor. I guessed that some sort of oil was being burnt—an oil, possibly from the crater, containing contraterrene matter, or else it would have been powerless to pierce the Black Sun's darkness. Before this fire stood the Squexie Oxin.

"We greet you!" Chebarbar said, or words to that effect.

She was greeting what I first mistook for a giant Christmas tree. The castle seemed to have only one room and this tree seemed to be the only thing in the room. Regarding it more closely, I saw its shaggy texture more nearly resembled a cactus covered with spikes. Even as I looked, it fell apart.

It disintegrated into hundreds of identical logs, each the size of a rolled hearth rug, each covered with the fleshy spikes. Most of those logs contented themselves with milling about our feet; one stood on end and sprouted a sort of flower which assumed lips and ears. It conversed with Chebarbar.

While they talked, one of the logs inspected me, rubbing my leg with its spikes. These were fleshy and not particularly sharp. All the same, the feeling nauseated me so much that I gave the log a kick. Every log present instantly twitched in sympathy; the ones nearest me blossomed forth with mouths and squealed in protest.

So I learned that the Squexie was a sort of gestalt entity, all its

parts serving a greater whole. This did not surprise me. Nothing surprised me. I merely stood feverishly thinking of the comfort of a bunk on a Trans-Burst ship.

At last Cherbarbar finished talking.

"Well, does this thing help us?" I demanded.

"For the sake of the Ungulph of Quileh, the Squexie will take us to Ongustura. It seems to have very little love of you; you would be advised not to molest it again."

"Never mind that! Does it know who you are?"

"Heaven forbid! It seems rather a petulant being."

"Just keep swinging your talisman; if necessary I'll swing my sword."

For reasons of its own, the Squexie would not leave its castle for another derv, when the Black Sun would be higher in the sky. This was not entirely to our disadvantage, since both Chebarbar and I were tired. We were given some warm oily meat to eat, probably pelican from the crater, which I got down with my usual perseverance. Then, stretching out by the fire—I with my violent misgivings overcome by fatigue—Cherbarbar and I fell asleep.

The Squexic roused us when it was ready to go. One minute we were sleeping and the next being bundled out of the castle.



We crossed by the frozen bridge, the logs bounding along all round us.

Much to my surprise and delight, the tiger-rhino still waited at the crater rim for us. Chebarbar and I climbed onto it with cries of affection; it was like meeting with an old friend again! Also, it solved a severe problem. In this unnatural blackness, the Squexie—obviously composed in part of CT material—could see as easily as we see in a normal day. It needed no light. But we did, and we had none. The way to Ongustura would have been hell had it not been for the tiger-rhino, which seemed to pick its way through the impenetrable black by divine instinct.

Almost at once, another quarrel developed—or rather the Squexie developed it. His high-pitched voice sounded from lips ranged all round us.

"What's it blethering about now? Let's get moving!" I snapped.

"The Squexie says he only offered to take two of us to Ongustura—not three. Accordingly, it will not take us all."

"My godly galaxy! Tell him we are not three, nor two, but one. Together we make a creature called a Syllabub, a gestalt beast with magical properties."

This rubbish was translated to the Squexie, who mercifully swallowed it. We moved on. It seemed a terrible pity to me that such a marvellous creature as the Squexie should in all its multitude of parts be able to muster no more intelligence than a tarsier.

Nevertheless, on our cold and tedious journey I did manage to extract from it some items of information. In particular I was interested in learning more about the curious habits of CT matter. Hitherto I had held the accepted scientific view that nothing but a violent explosion resulted when it came into contact with ordinary matter. Although the Squexie knew little and cared less about the origins of Smith's Burst, it too accepted that this was what had happened originally. But it said there was a third force present on Glumpalt called "noggox."

This I did not believe.

"Tell it that all matter must have a core that is either positive or negative," I instructed Chebarbar.

She translated its reply.

"The Squexie says that between plus numbers and minus numbers lies a point of neutrality called 'nought' or 'zero.' This point exists also in matter, though it is rare, and it is called 'noggox.' It can act as a sort of binding agent between CT and T material."

I fell silent. Chunks of the anti-grav stuff were still in my pocket.

I knew I had only to get them and my knowledge back to civilisation and I could become rich enough to buy Glumpalt many times over. But what would you do with a dump like Glumpalt?

Such speculations and two breaks for sleep, when Chebarbar and I huddled close against the tiger-rhino, were almost my only distractions on that journey. I have already mentioned that it was cold and tedious, which leaves little else to be said, for all journeys anywhere have much in common, in that they are uncomfortable interims between two points.

So let me mention only that the snow soon abated, the air becoming dry and crisp. A CT moon spun across the sky, giving some welcome light, and was too quickly gone. It showed us the poverty of the country through which we travelled, parts of it being little better than deserts. Any hamlets we passed were utterly silent, their inhabitants hibernating while the Black Sun shone. That made me realise how grateful to the Squexie I should have been; without his aid, after all, I would have been utterly immobile, with no hope of reaching Ongustura before the rocket left.

Apart from the stray moon, we did have one other source of light, though it was only occasional and weak. We journeyed past several plantations of the orange-bearing hollies. The neon they contained had evidently a contra-terrene characteristic, making them shine with a faint, ghostly glow.

As we rode past one such plantation, a javelin struck my boot and glanced off. The tiger-rhino pranced violently, Chebarbar screamed. A great mob of ill-shaped villains burst from the prickles onto us. The Ungulph's soldiery had caught up with us again!

### VIII

Battle was joined!

Without hesitation—I almost said as one man—the Squexie Oxin threw itself on our attackers. For their part, they must have been primed with pre-combat liquor, for their courage was positively foolhardy.

When the tiger-rhino reared, I slipped from its back and fell heavily. Alas, I have revealed myself before as a poor horseman. In the melee, and in the fitful light from the plantation, I lost sight of Chebarbar. In the circumstances, the best thing I could do was protect myself.

Just a short distance away ran a tiny stream. On its nearer bank

stood one tall and ancient tree. Hoping it was a tree-being, such as I had encountered earlier, I ran to it. Surely enough, it lifted a tap-root from the water and squirted me. The liquid was freezing. It stopped me dead in my stride. Yet I was delighted and climbed swiftly up its branches, getting as high as I dared.

Even as I did so, the battle spread as I had expected, and moved about the base of my tree.

This too was good. My idea was that the tree-being, as a member of a peaceful vegetable species, would resent the excitement about him and move gradually away from the scene, thus carrying me out of danger unnoticed.

From my perch I had a fine view of the fight. The Squexie, it appeared, was getting the better of things. Its individual logs were difficult to kill, needing to be virtually sliced into two before they were put out of action. Their method of fighting was to tackle a soldier direct, leaping for his eyes and actually pulling them out with probing spikes. Such a simple manoeuvre was effective because of the Squexie's greater numbers.

I could not see that the creature's gestalt powers assisted it much. A birdman soldier of the Ungulph's, circling aloft, was doing great damage with a sort of harpoon. A log launched himself straight up into the air to attack; all the other logs flopped a couple of feet off the ground in sympathy. This sort of union, when several hand-to-hand (or should I say, perhaps, claw-to-spikes) fights were going on, seemed a positive disadvantage to the Squexie.

But weight of numbers was telling. And in the middle of a ring of fighting logs, where no soldier could reach her, Chebarbar sat safely on the tiger-rhino. Cheered by all this, I turned my attention from the strange battle to myself.

My tree-being had not moved. Whether because it was ancient and aloof, or because it was old and stupid, it remained where it was, in the thick of the fray.

"Get on, you brute!" I called to it. No move did it make. Nor dare I kick it, lest it had the power to shake me from its branches.

By now I was frozen from the wetting I had got. A cool breeze stirred, making me shiver uncontrollably. Hoping to warm my hands at least, I unhitched the primitive lantern from my shoulder and lit it. Its glow was so gratifying, or I was so near dead, that only after some while did I observe the light to be not only warming but illuminating me!

Amazed, I stared up. Now many stars, the luridly complex constellations of Smith's Burst, shone down on me. Ghostly forms

of the distant Glumpaltian landscape were again visible. The Black Sun had set!

Its passing had gone unnoticed because during the three awde:rs of its reign all the other suns had also set. Never, now I gazed about, did ordinary night seem so blessed or so bright.

The relief of being rid of that stygian gloom was great—and rudely shattered. Angry shouts below me made me look down. I was discovered. Too late, I dowsed my wick; I had already given myself away.

My tree was besieged. Nor was that all. The battle had stopped. Squexie and soldier stood peaceably side by side, all their belligerence directed at me. A great fire was being kindled near the plantation. By it I saw the demon king figure of the Ungulph of Quilch himself; the caps of his four tusks sparkled.

Cupping my hands, I shouted down to Chebarbar, asked her what had happened.

"Alas, we are lost!" she cried. "My father, the Ungulph, has newly arrived on the scene. He has shown the Squexie *his* talisman and told that treacherous creature who I am, saying I must be killed for what he calls my desertion. So the Squexie has turned against us."

My brain racing, I said nothing.

"Do something!" she called to me despairingly. "In a minute they will have you down from there, and then they will kill us both."

"Tell your father, then, that he will have difficulty in getting me out of here since this is my special guardian tree called Fiddlesticks. I can disappear inside it when I wish to. Tell him that I am, however, a great sportsman and will do anything for a game. I will come down and deliver myself to him if he will let me choose my own death according to the whim of luck."

She delivered the message to her father. I saw that swinish creature march back and forth indecisively before his fire before going to consult with the Squexie. By their looks, and the looks of the assembled soldiery, they were as intrigued by my proposition as I had expected.

With a gesture, the Ungulph finally barked something to Chebarbar. Her face turned up towards me, and she said in a trembling voice: "He demands to know first how this game of yours will be carried out. I hope you know what you're going to do, because I don't."

"Don't worry," I said. "Tell your father that I will come down out of Fiddlesticks and spin my sword in the air. If it comes down with its point in the earth, he shall kill me personally; if it lands flat, his gallant soldiers shall have the honour of tearing me into little pieces."

When this was translated, a roar of excitement rose from the watchers. They obviously regarded this fancy with delight. Almost with love, the Ungulph beckoned to me to come down. My offer was accepted.

Trembling with cold and tension, I climbed down the ancient tree and landed among the motley rabble. Muttering, they moved aside for me with some show of respect. When I drew my sword, the mutter swelled in volume and they pressed closer. I cleared myself a circle, taking care that Chebarbar, who was held firmly on her mount, should be near its circumference.

I waved my sword.

"Here it goes!" I cried. "Watch it!"

Though they did not understand, the exhortation was unnecessary. Every eye followed that glittering blade as it rose, turning over and over; every face upturned to follow its course. Since I had taken the precaution, before descending the tree, of tying a small chunk of anti-grav material to the weapon, I reckoned the sword would continue to climb for some ten seconds and take twice as long to come down. I could use those thirty seconds.

As the eyes turned upward, glued to that fateful weapon, I ran for it.

The wretch holding the tiger-rhino's bridle scarcely noticed as I snatched it from him. Leaping into the saddle, I applied the paddle hard. Our brave beast shot forward so rapidly that Chebarbar and I were almost thrown off. A moment later, we had broken through the crowd and were away.

And in another moment the whole mob was screaming after us.

## IX

This was a time when we were helpless. Chebarbar and I could only hang on tightly and hope that our steed would increase the lead he had over the rest of the field. We had no idea of direction. We could but hope.

We were lucky. The ground soon turned into an incline up which the six-footed tiger-rhino moved easily. Small rocky hills loomed

round us; the way grew so narrow that our pursuers were forced to proceed in single file, to their great confusion.

We trotted through what seemed to be a pass and began to descend. From then on our followers gave up the chase. They camped there, in the heights, so that during the next half-hour of our descent we saw their fires burning above us. The Ungulph's men and the Squexie together made a formidable body of creatures; gradually more and more points of fire, diminished by distance, sprang up, until a half circle like a tiara glittered over our heads.

It seemed we were safe from pursuit.

Trouble, my constant companion on Glumpalt, still had not forsaken us. Dawn was at last on its way, and ahead of us through the paling light I discerned a considerable town filling the valley. Chebarbar and I—and the tiger-rhino for that matter—needed nourishment and rest. Since we had no magical powder with which to perform the usual absolution ceremony, we should have to get into the town unobserved if we were to get in at all.

Our road was a dusty one. The trees by its side drooped, signalling a drought; a group of tree-beings, perhaps roused by the dawn, stood forlornly squirting dust over themselves. Beyond them we saw a flickering light.

"Some men are there," Chebarbar whispered to me. "If we could get into this town with them, we might be safe."

Halting our steed, I jumped down and went quietly forward to see what was happening.

Two rogues were there, one much like a shrimp, with giant whiskers sprouting from his sharp face, the other hump-backed and feathery, for all the world like a huge flea. He had five legs, but perhaps one had met with an accident, for this was the only creature I ever saw, even on Glumpalt, with an odd number of pedal extremities. I might have spent some while observing them had I not by this time entirely lost my sense of wonder.

They had a monstrous sort of barrel-bellied push cart which they were filling from a well. The shrimp-man was lowering and raising the bucket while his companion stood guard—presumably against demons—with a flaring torch. Doubtless, he thought it a hazardous vigil, for he peered here and there into the gloom so rapidly that he never saw me glide behind the water cart.

No sooner had I got into position than the shrimp-man brought up another wooden bucket full of water. As he staggered with it the two paces to the cart, I lobbed one of my diminishing store of anti-grav lumps under it.



This made the bucket jerk upwards. Trying to maintain his grip, failing, the shrimp-man lost his precious burden, which swung upside down as the stone pressed upwards for release. The two men collided and were promptly soaked with water. Their torch was effectively extinguished.

While they sorted themselves out, I slipped round and popped a piece of that invaluable stone in the flea-man's pocket. He wore over his curved back a great loose blouse affair which went so low to the ground it ended as a skirt. The pocket was in the skirt piece. The anti-grav lump now seeking release, the garment was borne upwards over its wearer's head.

In his panic, fearing demons, he attacked the nearest creature to hand—his companion. Delighted by this horse-play, I seized the cart and made off with it, leaving them to fight.

Hastily, Chebarbar and I hitched the tiger-rhino to the cart and drove down the wide, dusty road.

To my surprise, there was no barrier across the track such as I had always met with before at the entry to towns. Nothing hindered our entry—which was as well, for angry shouts and a growing cloud of dust behind us told us that the owners of the cart were in pursuit. How tired I was of being chased!

As we rounded a bend, a pear-shaped fellow in an absurd pink

Jack stepped into our path. Hastily I reined the tiger-rhino to avoid bowling him over. With plentiful gesture he began to accuse us of something. Chebarbar replied sharply.

The full drama of this situation was only borne in on me later, when Chebarbar explained what was said. The man in pink was a policeman. He was asking us what we, two strangers, were doing on the municipal water cart. Water was so scarce that he thought we were stealing it.

Haughtily, Chebarbar told him that we had only borrowed the cart for a derv, and that at present it contained nothing but haracktock, which is the nearest Glumpaltian equivalent to gin.

This excuse cut no ice with the pink fellow. Grasping the rail, he came aboard to look for himself. Not knowing what was going on, I was nonplussed and feared the worst. Fortunately, Chebarbar had all her wits about her. As the policeman bent over the great barrel behind us and peered in, she grabbed his ankles and pushed.

Even as the splash came, she took hold of my wrist and we were running for our lives.

The town—like every other town on Glumpalt—was a vast rubbish dump. The only difference here was that the rubbish-houses were separated into islands of rubbish by the untypically wide dust tracks. In the tired light of dawn, we had no trouble in losing ourselves and finding safety.

Chebarbar sold her talisman to a foul old woman at a foul old stall. With the proceeds, we hired ourselves an insanitary cupboard of a room and bought ourselves food.

Eating ravenously—nothing could turn my stomach now—we stared out of our tiny window. Hills ringed the town; on their heights we could just make out fires and the figures of men. The Ungulph and the Squexie were still there; it looked as if they had the place surrounded and were intending to attack it as they had attacked the warren-village. Not only were we probably being hunted in the town, but we should find great difficulty in leaving it.

Above the hills rose the yellow sun, striking brightly onto the muddle about us. Any hope I might have drawn from it was dashed by my knowledge that this was the day the TransBurst Traders' ship would be leaving for Acrostic and other civilised ports. How long before the next one would call, or how far Ongustura was, I knew not.

"Don't be so gloomy!" Chebarbar cried, taking my hand. "Here we are at best safe and at worst together."

Absently, I stroked her hair. I had never told her I came from a

distant planet and intended to return there unaccompanied as soon as possible.

"We are the same shape and colour," she said. "Why don't you kiss me?"

The floor moved, the whole building shook. For a moment, I thought these were illusions produced by emotional strain. Then we ran to the window.

Our view was of course limited, but we saw a collection of houses a little way away collapse into a column of dust. And over the distant heights a puff of smoke hung.

"My father, the Ungulph! He is bombarding the city!" Chebarbar cried.

"With artillery? With cannon?"

"Yes indeed. He has half a dozen good cannon imported from a distant world."

"I never knew there would be any such weapons on Glumpalt. Why didn't you tell me before?"

She suddenly looked furious. Her mouth tightened at each corner.

"I didn't tell you because you never asked me! You ask me nothing about anything but immediate necessities. Though I have followed you and helped you, you have taken absolutely no interest in me. How do you think I felt, eh? How do you think I felt?"

By a happy turn of fate, I was spared having to reply by the building collapsing under our feet. Though we had suffered nothing like a direct hit, the house was so haphazardly constructed that the distant shock tumbled it. Chebarbar and I were on the first floor; three upper stories descended upon us.

It was alarming, but little more dangerous than being bombarded by a pack of cards. The worst part was being half-stifled by dust.

Dizzily, I sat up, stood up, pulled Chebarbar up after me, Choking, we climbed from the debris.

A crowd was rapidly collecting. As we pushed through their ranks, a roar sounded on our right. I turned. The pink, pear-shaped policeman was bellowing at us. Grabbing Chebarbar's wrist, I began to run.

We had a good clear start. We ran hard and well. Another building on our left fell slowly as we passed. Glancing back, I saw a mob after us. Enemies were all round us. In my bones I felt the end was near.

Pounding through the dust, we rounded another corner.

Bright, lightly, trebly blessed, the sweet slender sound of an

interplanetary freighter pierced the sky ahead. My heart leaped in joy and astonishment.

"Come on!" I cried.

The ship stood behind a wall eight feet high. Double gates bearing the legend "TransBurst Traders" were firmly closed. Over them glared a red notice: *Blast off Imminent*.

The Glumpaltian horde swept round the corner behind us. Wildly emptying all my pockets of stones, I found I had only two sizeable chunks of anti-grav matter left. Tucking them under my armpits, I seized Chebarbar again and with an enormous jump cleared the wall.

Officials—wonderful, symmetrical, humanoid officials—came up at once. Briefly, I explained who I was; I gave them my Galactic Credit Index, which stood high enough to make them welcome me as an unexpected passenger.

"Well, you'd better get aboard, sir," the Bursar said. "Everything's ready for countdown, I think. We've had clearance."

"I thought your Glumpaltian-routed freighters only called at Ongustura," I remarked.

"This is Ongustura," he said.

"But the islands the lake

"Oh, didn't you recognise it with the tide out? Always for about a fortnight after the rising of the Black Sun, Ongustura is left high and dry, as you see it at present. Now you'd better get aboard with your lady."

Chebarbar was sobbing. She clung to my dusty shirt, talking almost incoherently.

"I cannot come with you, my dearest. The magic of this ship is too powerful for me. If I entered it I should die! You know I love you—yet I cannot, cannot come!"

There was nothing I could say. This was as well, since I had been about to explain tactfully that I was unable to take her with me. Mutely, I pressed one of the two slippery chunks of anti-grav into her palm; I had an inkling that it would help the quick-witted girl to buy her way out of any future trouble.

"Weep not, Chebarbar," I said, kissing her nose. "Time will heal all things."

Smarting under the cliche, I climbed the freighter's ramp. The smell of canned air ahead was like perfume. Just before entering the airlock I turned to look back at the weeping Chebarbar.

Without surprise, I noticed that her tears were falling upwards towards the tatterdemalion clouds.



WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

For many years it has been the dream of science fiction fans that one day the people would take our favourite literature to their hearts: instead of being a ridiculed minority, we should be looked up to as pioneers, like a resistance movement after an unexpected liberation. Well, don't look now, but it's just all happened. The only difference was that the populace wasn't reading science fiction in magazines. It was watching it on television.

The impact of the Quatermass serial on fans was predictable enough. Take prominent fan and Nebula artist Arthur Thomson. On the night of the last instalment there he was poised quivering in space between the edge of his armchair and the end of his fifth cigarette, when a terrible disaster struck, one second only in horror to the TV set breaking down—a knock at the door. Backing through his bijou flat, Arthur opened the door and wrested his eyes away from the screen to find a tall, dark man with a sheaf of papers moving forward and saying (the man, that is, not the papers: the papers kept quiet, or at least remained stationary), "Good evening, Sir; I am from—" That was as far as he got, because the dis-

traught Arthur instinctively made a warding-off gesture and whispered: "I'm sorry. Quatermass is on." The stranger said understandingly, "Oh," and Arthur gently closed the door.

After the world had duly been saved by the palaeontologist and his piece of chain, Arthur was free to turn his mind to less vital matters and wondered who or what the man *had* been from, but alas at the moment of writing this question looks like ousting the Marie Celeste from the first rank of famous mysteries. (I hate to suggest to Arthur that he may have been from Littlewood's.) However the most interesting thing about this little episode, it seems to me, is that he seemed to see the utter reasonableness of Arthur's explanation for not being At Home to casual callers. The fact is that for half an hour on six consecutive Mondays a new social convention entered the British way of life: Bateman could certainly have published a cartoon captioned *The Man Who Interrupted Quatermass*. In fact the most mystifying thing about Arthur's visitor is why he wasn't watching it himself. All I can suggest is that if the B.B.C. say twelve million people were watching the programme, they

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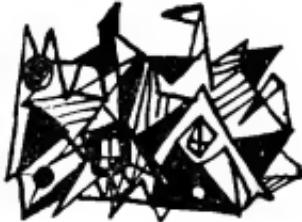
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To The Science Fiction Book Club, 38 William IV Street, London, W.C.2.  
Please enrol me as a member of the Science Fiction Book Club. I will purchase six bi-monthly choices, commencing with the ..... choice. After a year, if I wish to discontinue my membership, I can give one month's notice.

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065

Name..... (Mr., Mrs., Miss)

Address.....

must have had people out counting them. In which case of course Arthur's behaviour was impeccably correct.

There have been many attempts in the press to explain the success of the Quatermass serial, but they've all been written by non-fans and to us they leave the major mystery unexplained. What they say is true enough, but we fans know that the qualities they ascribe to it are common to all good science fiction, quite a lot of which has appeared in magazines from time to time. Yet the hard fact remains that the total readership of all the science fiction magazines in the English speaking world is not and never has been more than one tenth of one per cent. of the population. This has remained so obstinately true through A-bombs, H-bombs, sputniks and luniks that some fans have reluctantly been driven to the conclusion that the ability to appreciate science fiction is a sort of rare mutation, and that the few occasions on which a science

fiction novel or film has enjoyed popular success have been due to extraneous factors like sex or horror. I think the success of Quatermass finally disposes of that pessimistic hypothesis. Quatermass was true science fiction: tense, but not horrific. There seems therefore no reason at all why the mass audience shouldn't appreciate other science fiction, if properly presented. It's up to us to find out what the Quatermass serial had that some authors haven't got.

One quality might be sincerity. In press interviews afterwards Nigel Kneale confessed that he identified himself with the hero and wrote the story for love not money, but I think this was obvious enough from the script itself. Kneale had a story to tell, a story no better than dozens we have read, but he told it as he felt and believed it, without either talking down to his audience or trying to impress it with high-sounding phoniness. It's obvious for instance that he's personally concerned about the H-bomb, current NATO strategy, the perversion of science by politicians and racial intolerance, and all these came into the story. Not as elements in the plot, but as background. And since these are real things that concern us, they helped to make the story real to us in the same way as did the documentary realism of Cartier's production. The story seemed founded in fact, if not on it. And since the public have sometimes an uncanny ability to recognise and appreciate honesty, I think they appreciated that Kneale/Quatermass loved humanity and believed in science. I wish more of our authors and characters did.

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# GUIDED MISSIVES



Dear Mr. Hamilton,

My first contact with your magazine was in the Spring of last year with issue No. 26. This issue which was excellent throughout set a standard for the others.

By far your best contributor is Philip E. High. Every story of his I have read has left me wondering at his variety of plot. Please *BEG* him to write a sequel to "Lords of Creation", dealing with man's first contact with the galactic creators.

Another favourite author is Brian W. Aldiss, but I much prefer his stories with a galactic setting, like "T", to those he has been turning out recently.

I hope you have many such serials as "Wisdom of the Gods" in store for the future, and that a serial becomes one of your regular features.

Kenneth Johns and A. E. Roy constantly produce good astronomical articles. Astronomy, together with science fiction, are my favourite hobbies.

Your covers are always very good, but I wish you would tell us what it was that inspired the artist, some of them are very teasing (No. 37?).

As long as NEBULA continues its success formula of science fact with fiction, it will remain the foremost science fiction magazine in Britain.

J. GLEGHORN,  
Weymouth, Dorset.

Dear Mr. Hamilton,

I was interested by Mr. Mutch's suggestion in Guided Missives that the covers should have captions, but on looking at the covers of the last twelve issues, I feel that their simplicity explains them quite clearly, and also that it might be restricting if labels were attached to paintings devoted to imagination and fantasy. I, anyway, am happy with your present cover policy, especially since it has allowed no less than six artists to exhibit their work on your covers. Continued variety and experiment will keep NEBULA vital and exciting.

NIGEL JACKSON,  
Melbourne, Australia.

\* *Thanks to you both for your stimulating remarks. The cover caption controversy continues to gather momentum, without either side having scored a decisive victory. Do other readers want a special explanatory caption for each month's cover picture?*

Dear Sir,

I have just finished reading No. 38 of your publication, NEBULA. I liked it very much, but I am afraid that one of the stories seemed to contain a fundamental error.

The story I refer to is "A Race of Madmen", by Philip High. The error? Well, the author made the point that all

metal was destroyed on Earth, but that the human race came out on top in spite of this tremendous drawback. I would like to point out to Mr. High that the human metabolism depends on metals to a great extent. Metals like iron, copper, sodium, potassium and manganese, to mention a few. No metals—no human race.

This point, however, did not detract from the magazine's entertainment value. In fact, I should like to thank this author for what was otherwise a delightful story.

ALEX M. GOUGH,  
Dundee, Scotland.

\* *The trouble here seems to be in your interpretation of the word "destruction". A metal can be said to have been destroyed when it is dissolved in acid or is allowed to oxidize or rust. The metallic atoms are still in existence all right, but they no longer possess the physical and chemical properties of an uncombined metallic element, and so the ordinary metal has been "destroyed".*

*This is what happened in the story. The only difference being that by some quirk of alien science, the metallic compounds thus prepared became impossible to break down again into pure metal, and the surviving Terrans had to turn to the selective breeding of plants of various kinds, to provide themselves with the materials necessary for building a fleet of spaceships.*

*The human body contains no uncombined metal, only the compounds of metallic elements, which, of course, would not be affected at all by the process of "Negation Bom-*

*bardment" described in this story.*

Dear Sir,

I have tried to interest a number of people in science fiction, but a lot of them say: "I don't understand it, what is it all about?"

I should like to suggest that you print somewhere in the magazine a glossary of science fiction sayings and terms, each with its exact meaning in ordinary English. This would have to be a permanent feature in the magazine, or be included every couple of issues or so, if it was to do much good. I do feel that it would bring a greater understanding of science fiction.

H. PLIMMER,  
Levin, New Zealand.

\* *What do other readers think? Has science fiction become so esoteric that it requires to be translated into understandable English?*

#### QUESTION SPOT

*In which scientific questions from our readers are answered by one of our "Photo Feature" team of experts.*

Dear Sir,

Will you please tell me if Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity is applicable to interstellar travel since it predicts an apparent shortening of the time taken?

R. D. PRIMROSE,  
Dunoon, Argyllshire,  
Scotland.

\* *Dr. Archie Roy says: The velocity of escape from the Solar System at the Earth's distance from the Sun is about*

27 miles a second. This is a velocity that modern rockets could achieve if they were fired in the direction in which the Earth is going in its orbit. If a rocket-ship was boosted to this velocity and set off for the binary star *Alpha Centauri* (our second nearest stellar neighbour), it would take about 100,000 years to get there. Five thousand generations of men would live and die in the world of the Ship, facing superhuman problems in sociology, engineering, etc. This epic theme has been treated by a number of science fiction writers.

If, however, the ship's velocity relative to the Earth was increased to an appreciable fraction of the velocity of light—perhaps by accelerating at one gee for the best part of a year—then a completely different state of affairs arises, a direct consequence of Einstein's special theory of relativity which incidentally makes the velocity of light the maximum velocity at which any material body can travel. The bizarre consequences of this theory become apparent only when we have relative velocities of the order of the velocity of light. At the velocities with which we are familiar on the Earth the dynamical laws of Newton hold and bodies do not increase mass as they move faster or become thinner in the direction in which they are travelling or "live" slower—at least not appreciably so!

But at speeds near light-speed these effects occur. In particular, two clocks, one on

## ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1959 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below, or on a postcard if preferred, and mail it immediately to NEBULA, 101 Greenhead Street, Glasgow, S.E.

### For Those Who Wait

### Song of Ages

### The Silent Partners

### Day Without a Name

### Cadet

### Legends of Smith's Burst

Name and Address :

Mr. J. G. Wishart of Edinburgh 6, wins the One Guinea Prize offered in Nebula No. 38. The final result of the poll on the stories in that issue was:

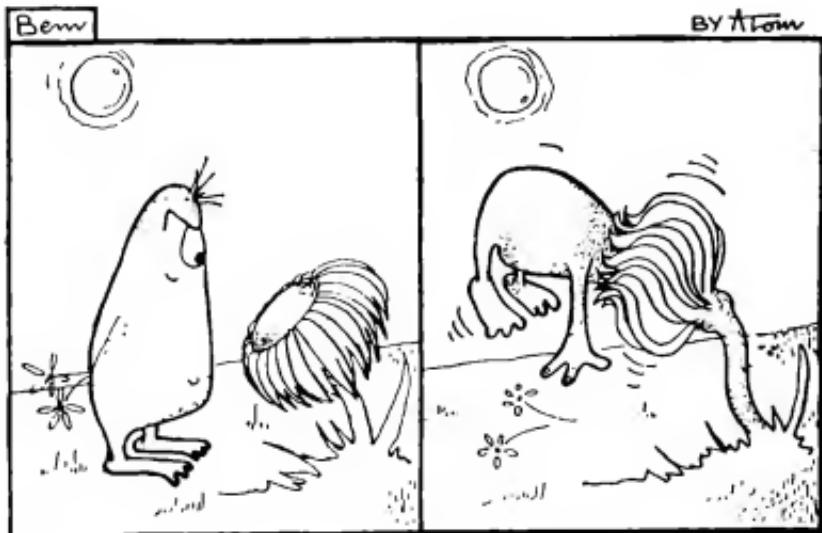
1. RACE OF MADMEN By Philip E. High	22.1%
2. STRONG WATERS By Robert Silverberg	17.9%
3. COLD STORAGE By Donald Franson	17.0%
4. THE ARM By Brian W. Aldiss	13.9%
5. CONSOLIDATION By John Diamond	11.2%
6. HOSPITAL SHIP By E. R. James	11.2%
7. MEDICINE MAN By H. Philip Stratford	6.7%

The result of the poll on the stories in this issue will be published in Nebula No. 44.

Earth and one on the star-ship, will not keep step with each other nor will two twins, one on Earth, the other a member of the crew of the star-ship, grow old at the same rate. On an expedition to and from Procyon which is 10 4 light years away, a ship that travelled within one per cent. of light-speed for most of the time would arrive back at Earth three years later—by ship-time. By Earth-time, over twenty years would have elapsed. In this way the theory of relativity which makes the velocity of light a prison for all material bodies, may itself provide the key to that prison if the star-ship can be boosted

to near light-speed and may enable Man to colonise other solar systems even on the far side of the Galaxy.

What is really interesting about Mr. Primrose's question is that it may be answered decisively in the next two or three years by direct experiment! It is hoped to synchronise two clocks and put one in an artificial satellite. By very precise measurements it should be possible to detect the slowing up of the clock in the satellite relative to the Earth-bound clock due to the time-dilatation effect and show that the so-called light barrier to Man's expansion into interstellar space can be overcome.



In spite of the fact that there is no sign of an atmosphere around Mercury, the planet remains hard and bare as it crosses the limb of the Sun, there have been reports of white streaky clouds over its surface. These clouds cannot have been water since the temperature on the hot side climbs to over 400°C and the low gravity would enable any light hot gases to escape into space.

These reported clouds could be ionisation of continual leakage of tenuous gases from inside the planet, they would be blasted by the Sun's intense radiation, comet-wise. At aphelion the lowest temperature of the dark side is about 250°C.

Greatest interest in this strange little planet lies in the orbit, which is the most eccentric of any of the major planets. The orbit is a pronounced ellipse, creeping in to within 28,500,000 miles of the Sun and then climbing out to 43,350,000 miles, and, in addition the orbit is inclined at 7° to the plane of the Solar System. As a result of this highly elliptical orbit, Mercury undergoes libration so that the Sun would appear to an observer to swing back and forth in the sky, and if he stood in the twilight zones he would be alternately exposed to the Sun's glare and then the ghostly glow of the solar corona. Of Mercury's surface no less than 26% is alternately roasted and frozen in this manner.

However, Mercury will one day afford the site for an excellent solar observatory. There are two spots on the surface where the temperature is always moderate and with the lack of distorting air they should provide the solar observer's dream locations. These spots are near the north and south poles, and if the observatories were built so that the Sun just appears to be cut by the horizon, solar reactions and sunspots could be studied with ease.

One danger against which the astronomers will have to guard will be the possibility of the intense heat and light warping their telescope mirrors. The outside temperature would be about 40°C; construction work is going to provide a few pretty problems, too.

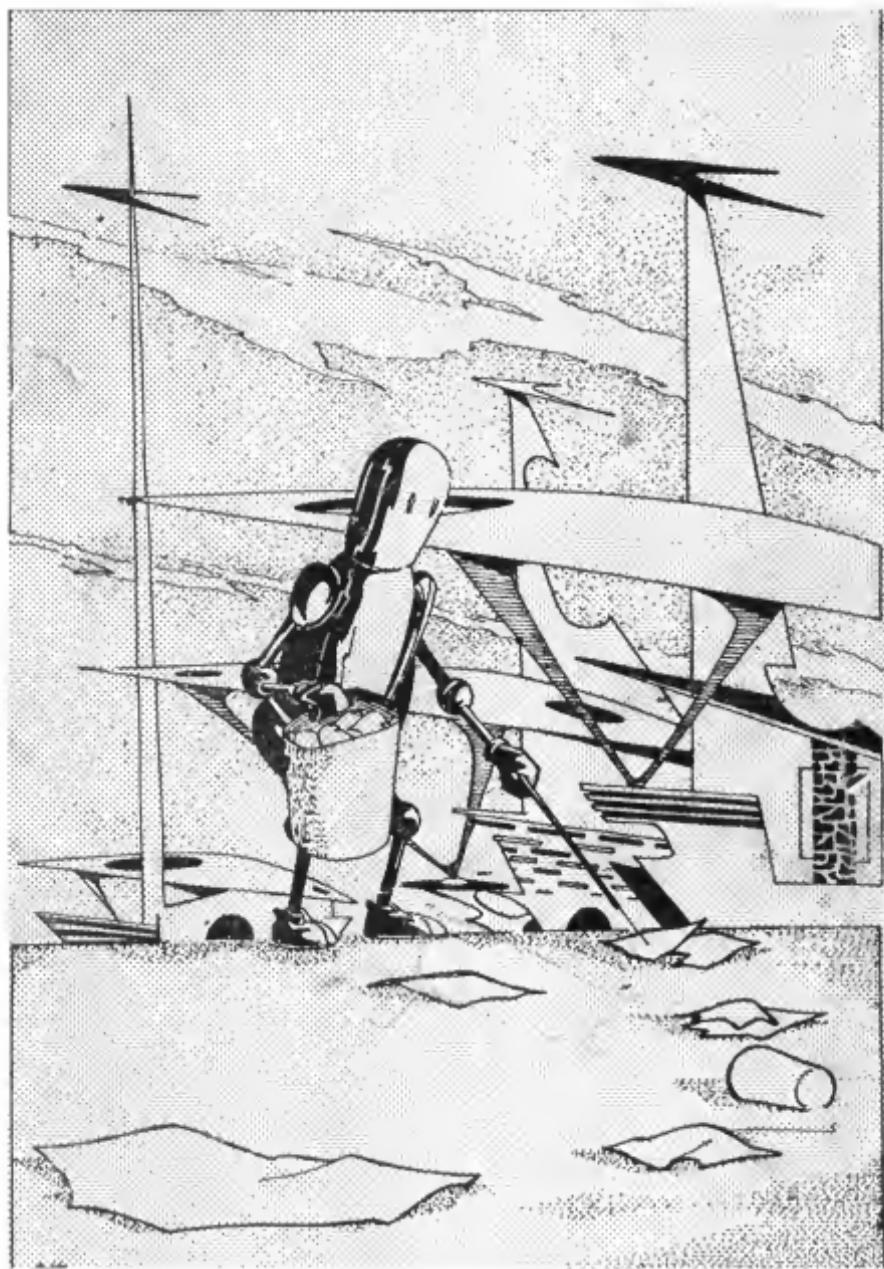
In itself, Mercury offers advantages for observation denied to other planets. Cosmic rays from the Sun could be counted minutes after they have burst forth, unwarped by a planetary magnetic field, for Mercury is too small to retain a large magnetic field of its own. Radio waves from the surface and corona could be measured undimmed by a planetary ionosphere.

Because of the 7° angle between the plane of Mercury's orbit and the plane of the Solar System, it is only occasionally that Mercury passes directly between us and the Sun and such a transit is shown in this month's photograph. The two spots close together are sunspots and they form a striking commentary on their size compared with that of Mercury. The next transit will be on November 7th, 1960.

One strange feature of Mercury's orbit is that, with reference to the fixed stars, its longer axis is slowly rotating around the Sun—a mere 40 seconds of arc a century but enough to worry astronomers seriously.

This change was at one time blamed on a planet named Vulcan, which was supposed to orbit between the Sun and Mercury. Search has shown that Vulcan is as legendary as the mythical god and his forge. Other factors blamed were a ring of small planets between Venus and Mercury and between the Sun and Mercury, on the Sun not being spherical beneath the surface, and on a disc of dust around the Sun. Unfortunately for the theorists, these would all have had effects on the orbits of the other planets.

Einstein finally showed that this advance of perihelion was explained by his general theory of relativity. Mercury's speed in orbit varies from 24 to 36 miles a second, speeding up as it approaches the Sun. According to the theory, the faster a body moves, the greater its mass becomes, so that Mercury's mass increases as it nears the Sun. Small as the change is, it is enough to cause the whole orbit to shift in axis about the Sun.



Another scan  
by  
cape1736

